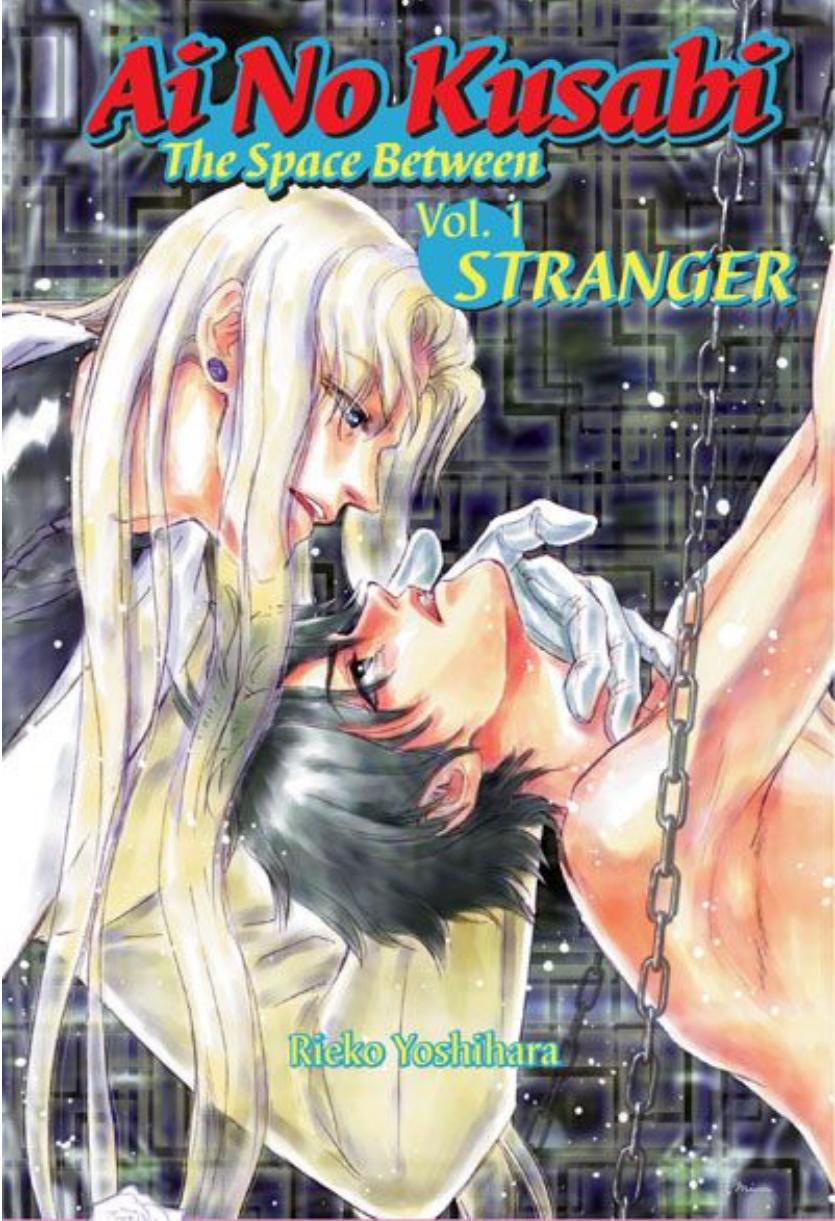


Ai No Kusabi

The Space Between

Vol. 1

STRANGER



Rieko Yoshihara

June

Yaoi Novel

Ai No Kusabi

The Space Between

Vol. 1

STRANGER

Written by

RIEKO YOSHIHARA

Illustrations by

KATSUMI MICHIHARA

English translation by

Kelly Quine



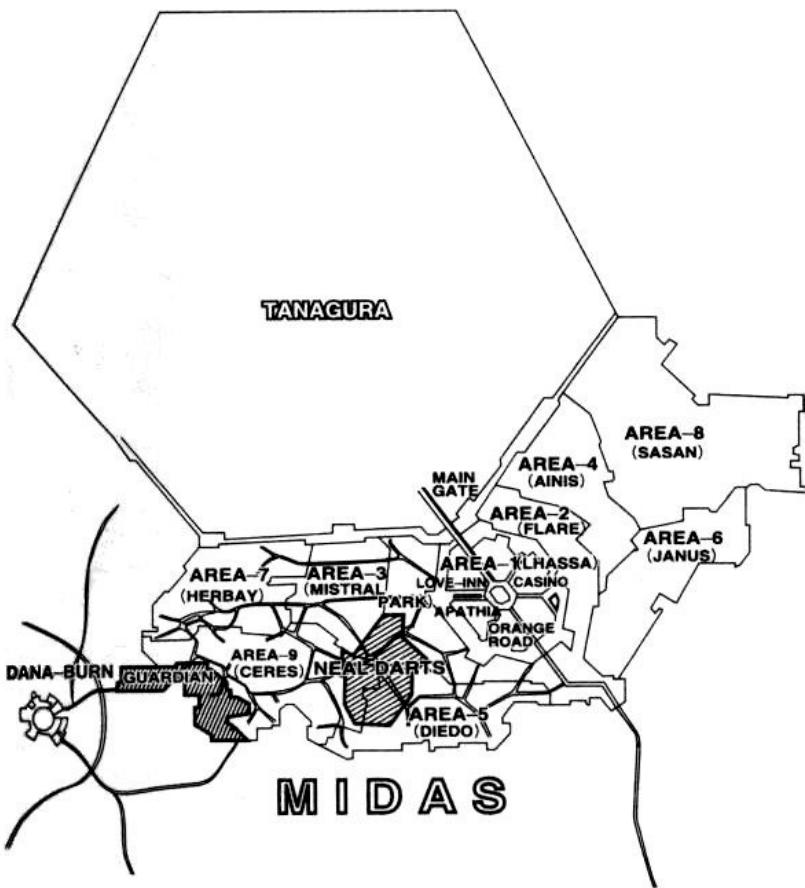
Los Angeles

Ai No Kusabi

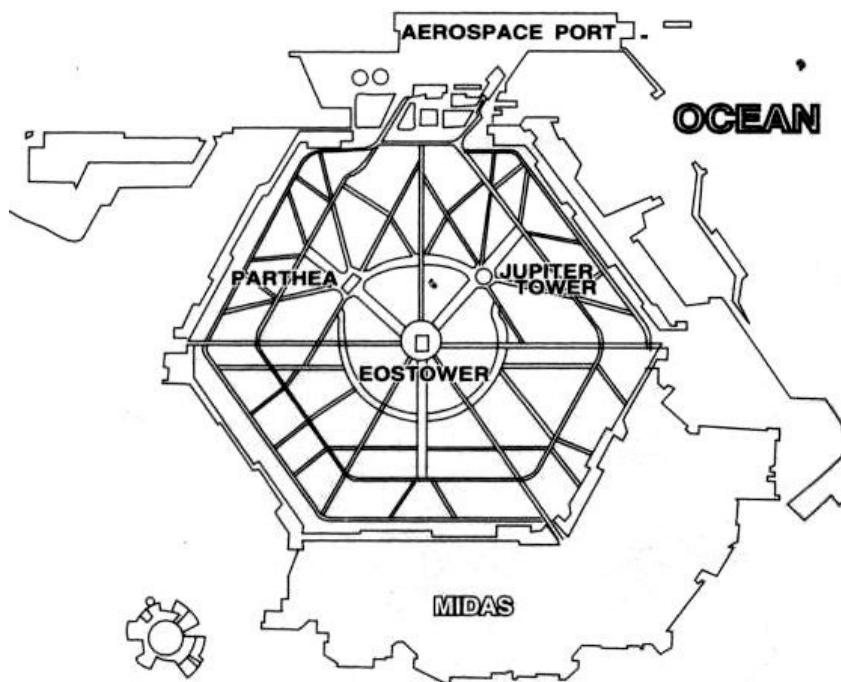
The Space Between

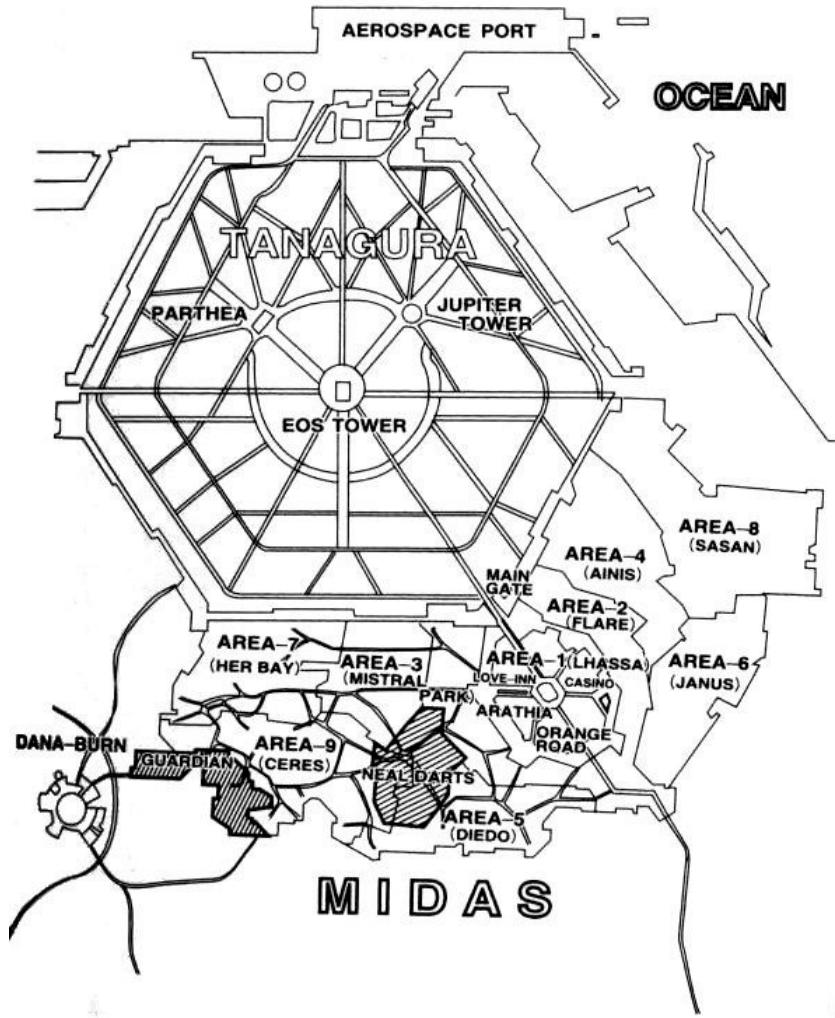
Contents

- [Chapter 1](#)
- [Chapter 2](#)
- [Chapter 3](#)
- [Chapter 4](#)
- [Chapter 5](#)
- [Chapter 6](#)
- [Afterword](#)



TANAGURA





Chapter 1

Darkness as far as the eye could see.

Not a darkness so impenetrable that it crushed the senses with an unbearable claustrophobia, but a kind of looming shadow transparent enough to reveal the outlines of the surrounding environment.

Dead quiet.

Programmed for "all-season comfort," the air conditioner barely made a whisper. And yet the wafting air currents undulated like shimmering heat waves traversing the contours of the uneven dark. They were as a heavy, opaque mass of an ice floe descending into the depths.

And then came the faint rustling of sheets from the bed in the middle of the room. Shadows wavered back and forth, as if buoyed on the ripples of fevered heat swelling up from the deep well of silence. The shadows writhed left and right, suddenly stiffening in apparent rigidity. The occupant of the bed turned over and over, wide awake, vexed with a persistent insomnia.

Or perhaps by the visitation of bad dreams?

No, that was not it either. Not that he could not bed himself down, *but that he could not raise himself up again.*

His wrists were firmly bound together above his head, while his strained arms trembled slightly. He clenched his fists, suggesting an exasperated defiance of his confined state.

But he *must* free himself, *no matter the cost.* Though for one possessed of such an indomitable spirit, he did not seem to be struggling with any great frenzy of effort.

Perhaps he had given up the fight or had grown weary of resistance. His expression remained inscrutable, though now and then there spilled from his lips a low, moaning groan—the sound of a man

reaching the limits of his perseverance.

He twisted his captive body to restrain what was bursting forth uncontrollable from within him, desperately clenching his teeth in order to resist it.

In such sounds were echoes of utter pathos. At the core of these utterances, a listener could almost catch the breathings of satiated sighs, permeated with deeply lascivious colors and scents.

Son—of—a—bitch! You—

The maledictions rose in his mouth, his breath shaking, his lips trembling, the mounting frenzy of his pounding pulse burning at his throat. As the repeated imprecations welled up and oozed away, he knew that doing so only ate away at his innards like a powerful poison. And yet the curses spilled out of him.

Goddamn fucking—!

Shedding tears without shame or honor, his eroded willpower and punished pride tossed to the wind, he scolded himself, biting his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood.



No matter how hard he screamed, his cries reached no ears but his

own. He was struck by the realization that if he cried for mercy at the top of his lungs, no one would listen. For the room in which he was bound, in stark contrast to its resplendent furnishings, was nothing if not a bleak jail cell.

How much time had passed since he'd been injected with the aphrodisiac? He'd lost all sense of time passing. Possibly a mere ten minutes, but it was more likely that a good hour had passed since the injection. His head throbbed to the core of his brain.

The muscles in his groin tightened to the point of pain. Spasms shook him to his fingertips. His breath grew ragged and his parched throat cried out for relief. And then there was his hotly erect member, so aroused as to send a dull numbness seeping through his loins, so engorged as to press the veins and capillaries to the bursting point.

His whole body had to climax! He could not restrain himself any longer!

Contorting his body and grinding his thighs together only intensified the agony, for his constricted organ seemed to want to spend itself in the worst way possible. His field of vision misted red. From his nether regions, the fevered convulsions surged through him, threatening to splinter his spine.

Restrained by a ring at the base of his cock, he couldn't ejaculate. Not at all. "Son of a *bitch!*" he spat, his lips trembling. Barely conscious, he repeated the word over and over, "*Shit, shit, shit!*"

He knew of no other way to escape the searing torture that even breathing had become.

That was when the door to the room slid open, right to left. Preoccupied with the anguish consuming him to the core, he didn't notice the Man entering the room.

The Man approached the Captive with careful steps. He carried himself with a supple grace, the thick carpet itself absorbing any audible evidence of his presence. Wordlessly he touched a switch by the bed.

The room at once filled with soft light. Having been held prisoner in darkness, the gentle brightness all but blinded the Captive. Even when narrowing his eyes, it took him a long minute to become accustomed to the light.

He took in the striking countenance of a beautiful yet merciless Man who seemed not to possess a speck of vulnerability, and tears sprang to his eyes. His willpower and endurance, stretched now to the breaking point, suddenly sagged in the face of the Man.

"And how are we doing? Holding up well enough?"

The Man's voice was several degrees colder than his indifferent mien suggested. A listener could not help but be persuaded by the particular firmness in his voice, a firmness that imparted the harshness of someone well-accustomed to giving orders.

"Enough already!" the Captive implored, twisting his body, choking back tears.

And yet the Man moved not an eyebrow. "I offered you the chance to take your best shot with any of the others. I gave you no leave to go and mount up some bitch!"

There was a disturbing discrepancy between the nonchalant tone of his voice and his eyes, which were cold as death. "At the very least, you knew that Mimea was espoused, did you not? Even Raoul is casting aspersions, saying you've gone and ruined everything. These are your just desserts."

The Captive could only lie there, catching his breath in response to the deliberate, yet harsh, words flung his way.

"Did your vanity really convince you that you could win Mimea over? That being the case, even if you were simply playing Casanova, you surely knew that there are rules of the game that must be respected?"

Behind the Man, a woman's shrill voice shot through the room. "It wasn't a game!"

The Captive shrank back, as if stung by the snap of her voice. His

eyes widened in surprise, seeing Mimea's face exposed to the world after so many clandestine trysts.

"She insisted on meeting you, and she wouldn't take no for an answer. Well, it's said that love is blind, but what the two of you don't seem to understand is that this is not your decision to make. So let's hear it straight from the horse's mouth."

Hear what? the Captive's quavering eyes asked silently, vaguely beginning to anticipate what the man was going to say next.

"The relationship was never real—that is what he said. If not Mimea, then any warm body would have sufficed. He was intrigued only by the body being *female*."

At that moment, another sensation crept up the Captive's spine. Not the arousing spasms of pleasure, but something more akin a cold, dark despair.

"As long as he was given an unoccupied pussy in which to quench his hot, throbbing manhood, it did not matter whose it was. Isn't that what you said?"

The Man would not be challenged. The threats implicit in the undercurrents of his voice overwhelmed the senses. The Captive's cheeks stiffened, and in that frozen state he gulped for breath and swallowed, hard.

But before he could will his trembling lips to respond, the woman spoke up. "That's a lie! You're all ganging up on us, trying to destroy our relationship!" She hardened her voice and glared reproachfully at the Man. To Mimea, the person who could shackle her lover as he pleased was more a rival for her affections than a symbol of ultimate authority.

"Do you know who Raoul chose as my partner? Jena! Supposedly because he's got good genes—" The way her words trembled and trailed off indicated the desperate nature of her emotions. "I'll have none of it! His perverted nature is written all over his face. The thought of being held by him... of having a child by him... makes me sick!"

As a woman this was something her pride would not allow, and yet almost in the same breath she addressed the Captive, with a certain pained affection. "You're different from other people, aren't you? You love only me, don't you?"

But the Captive didn't hear the half of what she said. It took all his effort simply to keep from groaning aloud, contorting his body in order to stave off the recognition of that which had been thrusting itself into the conversation this whole time. The only thing he salvaged from Mimea's words was that the exposure of his covert meetings with her would bring down censure upon her head.

Back when their secret became public, his mates had joined in the castigations. "*We've got no use for a chap who falls for a slumming Academy-manufactured princess.*"

Of Mimea it was said: "She's no judge of men, falling for trash like that." Such were the manner of words spoken behind her back. The envied product of the Academy on the one hand, and himself on the other: born and raised among the dregs.

But Mimea knew. Beneath the shadows of the ceaseless ridicule, behind the scourging hands of public censure and the daggers of reproachful looks, one and all had acutely realized what a rare specimen he was.

Despite the merits of his lineage (or the lack thereof), despite the beauty of his countenance (or the lack thereof), despite his criminal record (or the lack thereof)—the uniqueness of his presence alone bewitched people. For good or ill, that primal sense of self that up until then he'd believed had been etched in stone had been crushed without mercy.

Mimea had seen the end from the beginning: the day-to-day deceptions keeping them apart, the affectations of territoriality, the souls glittering beneath the bell jar.

Amongst all her colleagues he was the most beautiful of all. None of the flagrant and malicious gossip, or the dark jealousies, or the insidious behavior got under his skin. His speech and conduct remained uncivilized in the extreme and his utterly uncooperative

spirit never allowed him to go along just to get along. Nevertheless, his actions were not without meaning. He alone achieved a particular kind of "purity."

Which was why Mimea wanted him, no matter what. Although both birds in a cage, she wanted to believe that their pairing might lead to something completely new.

That was why *she* reached out to *him*, why she teased him with kisses, threw herself into his embrace, and so ardently desired to fuse their bodies as one. Thus would he become hers and hers alone.

Such had been the brittle, naive dreams she dreamed.

Despite his outwardly blunt and curt behavior, up until a few days ago he had always looked at her with eyes softer than any other. Now, however, he turned his face away with no offer of explanation. To Mimea, this burden was the hardest to bear. His silence kindled in her an inexpressible anxiety.

"Why won't you say anything?"

She now had to confront reality: he didn't wish to see her. What was the value of a life bound by invisible chains? A life compelled

The jumble of thoughts pained her heart. Unable to bear it any longer, she cried out almost hysterically. "Why won't you look at me? Say something, please!"

She raised her eyebrows and pursed her red lips, knowing he was unlikely to spare her even a glance. In one moment, she had been shown the ugliness of an unimaginable betrayal, illustrated in the turned back of the Captive who would not even rise to defend himself with a man's typical bluster. She could not speak, for all her anger—such was the fire in her eyes.

Ah, this is the end, the Captive thought in his heart.

"Coward!" Mimea reviled him, her voice almost becoming a scream.

With that came a rending, tearing sensation in his back, like being flogged with a nail-studded whip. He bit down on his lip all the harder. Brine oozed from parted teeth, stinging his throat as if wrapping it in thorns, the pain twining together with the scorching heat of the poison burning in his chest. His limbs stiffened. It was either a moan or a sobbing groan that emerged from his locked jaws.

Even he hardly knew the difference.

Standing at his back, Mimea turned away, her lips trembling.

"And perhaps you as well have learned a thing or two?"

Having assured himself that Mimea was moving with all due haste toward the door, the Man sat down on the edge of the bed. He was taking his time.

"Well, this conclusion was entirely obvious from the beginning," he murmured smoothly. He stripped off the blankets, revealing a naked body that was still in the process of growing into an adult. The supple symmetry in the Captive's maturing limbs and the manner in which his body writhed in the agonies of pleasure only worked to arouse the Man's sadism.

The Man's gaze crawled across the Captive's body. His cold and placid eyes reflected no heightened passion, no racing pulse. Only when the Man's cruel gaze fell between the Captive's thighs did his face darken in the slightest.

The hard, aroused crown of the Captive's manhood cried out to his tormentor. *I want to come! Let me climax!*

"You want to come?" the Man whispered, in a coaxing voice.

The Captive's lips trembled as he caught his breath, his watering eyes pleading for him. He forced himself to nod stiffly, repeatedly.

The Captive took a deep breath as the Man deftly parted his knees. He believed at long last he was about to be released from this maddening torture.

However, as if to scorn such rash optimism, with not so much as glance at his swollen, ripened cock, the Man exposed the underside of the Captive's left thigh and with his finger gently stroked the valley dividing the two hillocks.

With a groan, the Captive's eyes rolled back in his head.

"You enjoyed Mimea's pleasures without my leave. Did you really believe that you could wrap up everything so cleanly after it was made known, just like that?"

For the first time, a real shadow of fear clouded the Captive's eyes.

As always, the Man was the most serene of masters, to the point of appearing excessively frigid. But beneath the facade of this man, whose voice never wavered in the slightest, hid the face of a hard and relentless taskmaster. The Captive knew this better than any.

Which is why, at this juncture, he did not throw himself at the man's mercy, pleading "*Why?*"

When his relationship with Mimea had been revealed to the Man, he'd been the defiant one. He'd cuckolded her consort and lost himself in the affair that ensued. It was something anyone could have done, but that was not why he did it.

He loved Mimea. Her glamorous appearance. Her pure and cultivated haughtiness. Her ignorance of the real world, into which she never ventured beyond her assigned place in life. The softness of her skin wherever he touched her. He loved everything about her.

She held no prejudices toward him the way others did. She was his only companion. She accepted all of his maverick qualities at face value, and him as a mere human being. And yet he knew that there was a dark side to their brief "honeymoon" together, and whenever they spoke to each other as "lovers"... and that was the secret thrill he got from betraying the Man.

It was because the Captive had found himself in a gilded cage he had never desired. For a feral child who'd never stooped to lick

another's boots, who'd known nothing but his own hard-earned self-respect, that uncontrollable sense of claustrophobia was suffocating him.

In this state, things could only go from bad to worse. He was chaffing at the bit, rotting from the inside out, and it was killing him. Casting his bruised pride to the wind and kissing up to the Man would destroy it once and for all.

That's why, even when the moment of truth came, he took it lightly. That made his sense of guilt toward the Man—and all the more so toward Mimea—that much more intense.

But now. Now, fear touched his heart.

"With Mimea—it was—we did it only once."

He knew that the Man would never fall for such a clumsy excuse, but he also knew, with a certain sense of dread, that he had to offer some sort of rationalization.

"One time is as good as a hundred, as far as I am concerned. That you held her in your arms is reason enough."

The ball of the Man's finger crept teasingly toward his anus. The Captive jerked. Not only had his penis ripened to an oozing plumpness from such paroxysms of pleasure, but the hidden flower of his bowels as well. That which under ordinary circumstances opened its petals only to persistent foreplay had already become enchanted.

As if to drive home the reality of its promiscuous condition, the Man skimmed the folds of the flower with his fingertips. "You like it the best here, like this—"

No!

But his body betrayed the Captive before the words could emerge from his throat.

The realization that he was powerless to restrain himself only left him more afraid. Goosebumps erupted wherever his flesh

succumbed to the mining pins and needles of pleasure.

Slowly, the Man penetrated him with his finger, triggering provocative undulations in the Captive's body. The sensation aroused a guttural groan as his loins twisted and writhed uncontrollably.

"What's this? Trying to salvage your ego even *now*? How about giving us a good yelp for a change?"

The Man's voice possessed the stillness of permafrost, as far removed from his normal coolness as could be imagined. Indeed, such imaginings alone left the Captive speechless with fear. With every turn of the Man's lasciviously worming finger, the chronic throbbing contracted further, producing an intense and spreading numbness throughout his body.

Half-unconsciously the Captive tightened his sphincter. But instead of repelling the invasion of the foreign object, his body gripped the Man's digit more tightly, drawing it deeply inside him with increasing pleasure. And as he did so, the quivering in his loins began to mount slowly with a shameless, if charming desperation.

And yet...

Clearly not even that was sufficient for the Man, who licked his earlobe and murmured in his ear. "Yes, that's a good boy."

"*Hiiii*—" trilled the Captive. There was a small scream, and his back arched. The whirlpool of tiny, tingling teeth gnawing at his spine suddenly bared their fangs and pierced the top of his skull. His outstretched arms and strained legs jerked and convulsed.

With a vengeance the Man jammed his finger deeper, causing fiery darts to scorch the insides of the Captive's eyelids. He caught his breath, feeling as if every blood vessel in his body was about to burst. Not only his swollen cock, but his painfully erect nipples as well.

He could have escaped the truly unbearable agony by fainting, but the Man forced him to pant laboriously for air, not letting him

come. Bringing the bud of his anus to such effulgent bloom, the Man bound him to consciousness with lust, toying with his nether parts without respite.

"Ahhh... haaaa... hnnnnn..."

The Captive's trembling lips shock with ragged breaths that pulsed in his throat. His hips heaved violently, yet drew forth only a premature, glistening thread, and with it not a single promise of release.

"Aaaaargh...!"

With every half-cry that escaped his throat, cries approaching a scream, his body burned all the way down to the tip of his rod's honeyed mouth. Such was the unimaginable menace in the Man's practiced foreplay.

The Man toyed mercilessly with the Captive's piercingly hard nipples, making him keen. He brought forth the naked head of the Captive's shuddering stamen to caress it with his fingertips, making the Captive howl. His anus having tightly swallowed one finger, the Man twisted in a second, forcing it wider.

"Hiii—yaaa—!"

As tears streamed down his face, the Captive gasped, pleading in ragged shards of language. "Enough... no more... won't... do... it... again... ahh!"

He was begging, pleading for forgiveness. Not again. Never again. *He'd never do it again!*

Mercy!

The earnest words rose again and again as if in a fevered delirium from his benumbed, frozen mouth. The Man once again whispered into his ear. "I'll let you come. As often as you wish. Until you regret that you ever held Mimea in your arms."

And then with unequalled, frigid calmness, he pronounced the verdict, one imbued with a maddening darkness: "You are my pet.

Know this to the marrow of your bones."

The Man's upturned blue eyes were so unimaginably beautiful that they could make anybody tremble with awe. In this moment, however, they also glimmered with an icy fire—perhaps revealing the fury of his wounded pride, or rather, a manifestation of his uncontrollable obsession.

It did not matter which of these was correct. For the Man was aware that at the base of his haughty convictions, there swirled a dark whirlpool of twisted jealousy towards Mimea.

Chapter 2

Midas. Sin city. A Caligula seaming the silent, tranquil passing of the midnight hours.

Or perhaps a Mephistopheles more evil than any conniving sovereign. Or an embodied Shangri-La hiking up the hems of her layered, neon-bright kimono, seducing souls while wanton laughter spilled from the corners of her mouth.

Midas' rotting will and heart and intellect collected hither and yon in stagnating pools and ruled without question over a darkness beholden to no one.

For all these reasons it was called the Midas Pleasure Quarters. The infamous city was an urban satellite of the central metropolis of Tanagura, itself ruled by Lambda 3000, the giant mainframe known as "Jupiter." Its virtual precincts served up every imaginable mode of amusement, answering to the wants and needs of mortal flesh. There one could find casinos, bars, brothels, and all facets of the entertainment industry.

Within the boundaries of Midas, morals and taboos did not exist. Only the night filled with salacious, suspicious, and patronizing glitz. Here, the loud and garish hours wasted away until the dawn.

But beneath its dazzling outward appearance hid another, more repulsive face: the grotesque visage of Midas supping at an endless banquet table of pleasure, where unfettered basic instincts entwined with human desire stripped bare.

The boundlessly promiscuous and enticing lightbeams floated on the darkness, and at the foot of these gigantic, fluorescing bug zappers, the jam-packed hordes bathed in the sluggish, lukewarm breezes. The clinging breath of Midas coiling about a man's listless limbs was nothing if not an aphrodisiac, numbing rationality and turning the heart and mind to jelly.

But heading across the overpasses away from the two concentric rings that formed the core of Midas—Area 1 (Lhassa) and Area 2

(Flare)—these besotted sensations faded. In the time it took for the cold night air to dissipate them, the urban landscape changed completely.

The outskirts of Midas. Special Autonomous Area 9. *Ceres*. The scorned "Crotch of Midas." The slums. Even the proprietors of the Pleasure Quarters furrowed their brows in distaste and never broached its boundaries.

There were no hard, high walls isolating it from the adjoining areas, no interdicting lasers preventing intrusion or trespass. Nevertheless, the avenues separating *here* from *there* marked an abrupt change in scenery obvious to all but the blind.

No signs of human habitation could be seen on the rubble and trash-strewn streets. Needless to say, the flood of garish neon staining the Midas nights was a world away, setting the crumbling walls of the buildings alight with a dirty brown afterglow.

Its odd and dissolute appearance suggested that the indifferent passing of time had suddenly refracted upon itself, warping past and future in an unexpected direction.

As did the relentless enthusiasm erupting from the Pleasure Quarters. As did the coquettish voices, smothered with flattery, scattered on the wind. Nothing reached this wasteland except in surrender to the confusion of ominous and ghastly colors.

Ceres was home to the night soil left behind in the dust of the era. Any determination to clean out the steaming piles had long since exhausted itself. And any capacity for self-renunciation and purification that could have resurrected the community as a community had died long ago.

The only sound reaching the ears were the occasional stirrings of deeply-held resentments and depraved sighs, day and night sowing the stench of rot and death. Nothing could thrive in this poisoned ground, not people and not a city. Growing accustomed to the constant drizzle of scorn, a man's dreams rotted away and died in the slums.

To the citizens of Ceres, the central metropolis of Tanagura (where everything was and would be shipshape to the end of time) was a long, long way away. An unimaginably different world. Here they were not even permitted to lick the boots of Midas, that vainglorious despot of the night.

They lived in Ceres with the painful realities of the present and the ghostly dreams of the wrecked past. No one ever promised them a rose garden.

That day the heavy leaden clouds moved through the skies with an unexpected quickness. The weather somehow held throughout the morning, turning bad just past noon. In the space of ten minutes, a sudden downpour became a violent thunderstorm.

The rain drummed incessantly on the ground as if to pound the slums themselves out of existence. The drains in the garbage-laden streets clogged and overflowed. With nowhere else to go, the runoff grew into a rampaging river that washed everything away with it.

Then came the night.

Having wrecked its mayhem and retreated, the storm left behind a sky shot through with stars. On this night alone the typically dull darkness was strangely, and refreshingly, clear.

The night's ambience alone proved refreshing. In honor of the afternoon's downpour, the youth of the slums had whiled away the hours isolated in their hovels. Now they busily vented all that stored up heat.

Mates poured down the alcohol and rushed through obligatory bouts of sex abetted by further helpings of drugs. There was nothing at all unusual about gangbangers prowling this cramped territory, knocking heads and causing trouble.

The balance of power in Area 9 changed with the seasons. Which was to say, despite the generous application of herbicide, some new

species of weed would eventually spring to life after the rains went away. Yet for the most part they possessed so little spit and fire that even gossip about coups and internal rivalries was rarely taken seriously. These gang conflicts could hardly be said to constitute a "rivalry of warlords."

The place stunk to high heaven with rogue males and beasts of burden, but no one had the strength of personality to drag them into line and begin to conquer. In the end, however, there was no denying these ongoing turf wars, whose violence could in large part be blamed for the deterioration of public order in the slums.

Recently, the struggle for supremacy in Area 9 had arisen between Jeeks (one of the new breed of "Hyper Kids"), and Mad Dog Maddox, fighting to retain his lost power base. It was said that this constituted a battle between the old and new regimes, and all the while, powerful third parties hung back in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike.

It was in this fashion that, for almost four years, rather than putting their own lives and credibility on the line and simply taking what they wanted for themselves, it was the scrambling after scraps—the ensuring of mutual restraint through mutual spinelessness—that had become common practice.

Back in the day, Bison had run the Area 9 free fire zone, also known as "Hot Crack." But at the pinnacle of their success they abruptly disbanded, and a successor had not since been decided upon.

Now it came down to either Jeeks or Maddox.

"All that remains is the timing of the *coup de grâce*," boasted the big mouths. But to pull that off, one decisive element was lacking: a strength of will that would charm followers and multiply the collective power of their individual strengths.

The slums had once known a man possessed of such extraordinary charisma. The boy left the Guardian foster center at the age of thirteen with no special position or privileges, yet in a surprisingly

short time he'd made a name for himself in the slums.

It was not because of his striking appearance. Nor did he curry favor needlessly, nor was he quick to bend the knee, nor was his trust easily earned. Everybody who knew him agreed that it was because of the superior nature of his personality that belied his mere thirteen years.

"He's a regular Varja," they said. "Beholding to no one."

All of the residents of Midas knew of the mythical beast Varja, also known as Ragon, demon god of the underworld, or Grendel, the soul destroyer. A beast of prey that could crush a limb to the bone with a single chomp of its steel jaws and razor-sharp fangs. A disdainful chimera taking to the air with the four wings on its back, its coat glowing with a bewitching black luster.

On one hand, he was compared to that Varja because of his jet-black hair and obsidian eyes, unique even in the slums that scorned him as a mongrel and a half-breed.

On the other, it was due to the calculated ferocity that could never be imagined behind such a delicate appearance. If "survival of the fittest" was the law of the jungle, then the weak seeking out the patronage of the strong and drawing close to them was a particular quirk of human behavior.

However, he took no notice of those sucking up and lavishing meaningless compliments upon him. And though well connected, he demanded no particular *quid pro quo* in return. It was because he always had at his side a "pairing partner," someone who could be called his "better half." It was no exaggeration to say that he had eyes for none other than that youth.

Assuming that a person matures over the years as the trials of life accumulate, there are also those whose superior character yields neither to age nor gender. Every move he made was studied with an almost blatant interest and a curiosity, and yet, he gave all this attention little thought in the course of his day-to-day life.

Yet there was neither restraint nor mercy in the hand that so

modestly brushed away the sparks alighting on his own person. Even so, the circle of those enchanted by his charisma continued to expand, and with him commanding the troops, it was only logical that Bison should have risen suddenly to prominence.

But then *that day*. Like a bolt out of the blue, Bison disintegrated in mid-air. The slums looked on in disbelief, speechless with amazement. Gone, *just like that*.

There were no two ways about it. The word went forth that Riki had retired from Bison.

Why? What were the reasons?

An extraordinary shock raced through the slums, accompanied by a flurry of obscenities and exaggerated rumors masquerading as conjecture. The truth of Bison's dissolution remained wrapped in mystery.

Only *he* could lead them. Regardless of the truth behind Bison's demise, Bison lacked Riki's fierce center of gravity and simply ceased to be. And so Bison all but went extinct, leaving only garish urban folklore behind in its wake.

Almost four years had passed since then.

The original Bison members had steadily reestablished themselves in their own way (though it'd be hard to say they'd done a good job of it), and the neighborhood had grown restless.

Naturally, over these four years a great number of pretenders had attempted to win them over and jack up the street cred of their own groups. Bison may have dissolved, but its strong presence continued to be felt, and young bloods eager to grasp even the tiniest share of that glory made transparent attempts to win them over.

While there were those who both publicly and privately proclaimed themselves remnants of the Bison fringe, Riki's old partner and the rest of the Bison veterans resisted the urge, no matter how solicitous the flattery became. After tasting the thrill of standing

shoulder to shoulder with Riki and running with his pack, nothing could take his place.

The same way standing water goes bad, the qualities of a conflict changed with time. Those who couldn't ride the rising tide of the era were destined to fall behind and kiss somebody else's ass.

Seen in that light, the choice of the former Bison members was a heartfelt one. Their past glories had been cruelly reduced to rubble. Avoiding the humiliation becoming somebody else's bitch could at least be counted as an accomplishment.

And yet now there emerged those who held their presence in pure contempt. Clinging to the ultra-right wing were Jeeks and Maddox. Jeeks of the Hyper Kids and Mad Dog Maddox. No matter how much they extended their power and influence into the slums, other groups gave them a cold shoulder.

"They're not anything like Bison!"

"Posers! Nothing but pretenders!"

Calling them out and drawing the comparison to Bison—always the same, loathsome, knee-jerk reaction.

Bison. Bison! *Bison!*

Undoubtedly, those who saw themselves as the two power brokers of the slums had gotten fed up with the sound of that name. They could take no pride in facing off against the pretensions of a legend that was now a shadow of what it used to be. And that was why they promised once and for all that they would smash the rotting remains of the name "Bison" and everything associated With it.

The two circling moons had never been so beautiful, dyeing the night sky in bright relief.

"Haa—haa—haa—"

Panting, Kirie pressed his face against a crumbling wall in a vacant back alley and took a long, hard breath. He'd left his room and come to the usual gathering spot, intending to hook up with his mates. So what the hell was going on?

Sons of bitches! Bunch of dirty, low down—

The surprise attack had come out of nowhere. He'd somehow parried the first blow, and after that he'd taken off, running like crazy, trying to shake off his pursuers. Now, he didn't have the slightest idea where he was.

Shit!

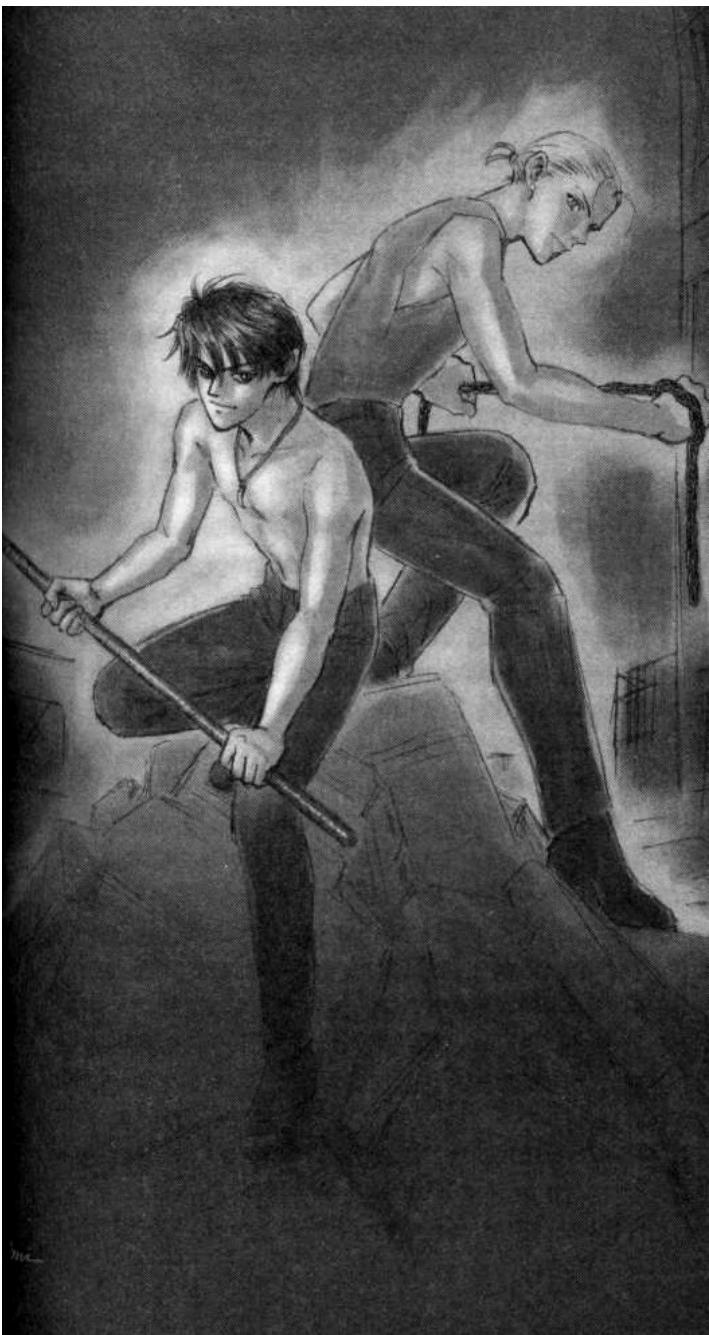
His heart pounded like a drum and the sweat streamed off of him. All that escaped the iron trap of his mouth were the muffled bellows of rage.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

Cussing was the only thing he could do in his current state of mind. Kirie wiped away the sweat coursing down his forehead. It was then, as he surveyed his surroundings, that a dot of red flame unexpectedly popped up in the darkness at the far reach of his eyesight.

He ducked his head instinctively, startled. As he did, he cast a quick glance beyond the wall and dimly observed someone sitting on the rubble of the destroyed building opposite. The corroded alleyway was painted in the shades of the night, lit up only by the precarious blue light of the two moons turning overhead.

The dot of red light was probably from a lit cigarette. *What the hell was that guy thinking, lighting up in place like this?* As he raised his eyebrows at the question, the sound of approaching footsteps echoed down the alleyway.



"He there?"

"Naw. Looks like he took off."

"I told you we shouldn't have pussy-footed around like that. We should have gone straight at him."

"The hell you say? That little bastard was fast.

The high register of their voices suggested boys young enough that their voices hadn't broken yet. The shadowy figures blustered on irritatedly.

"What are we gonna do now? He saw us."

The atmosphere surrounding them was thick with fear and loathing.

Kirie was outnumbered. If he was discovered here, he had about a one-in-ten odds of emerging without considerable battle damage. Cognizant of the realities around him, he sank down further into the darkness, only now managing to catch his breath.

"Big deal. We lit a fire under his ass. That should be good enough, huh? No second guessing ourselves next time. We'll beat the shit out of him."

Kirie curled up his fists and ground his teeth together at the sound of these chest-thumping declarations. *Smart-as kids.* Kirie himself was a third-year colony-dwelling kid, but the word on the street said that the members of the Jeeks gang were all teenagers less than fifteen years old. In other words, they were fearless kids only beginning to accustom themselves to the differences between life at the foster center and life in the slums.

For the same reasons, Bison in its heyday had been even more precocious and extreme than Jeeks. At the age of thirteen, whether they liked it or not, the Bison kids were cut loose from Guardian. Left to their own devices, they had no choice but to get their shit together, and fast.

It was for that reason alone that the gang's surviving members had become for Jeeks a constant pain the ass. He never passed up the opportunity to diss the revived Bison as a pale imitation of its former self, because as long as Bison existed, everything Jeeks did

would be compared to that "graven image."

That Riki was no fallen idol only made things worse. Bowing out on an unbroken winning streak made him a ghost with references and a resume.

But regardless of what had been *then*, just hanging with Bison these days meant a knife in the back in a dark alley, and Kirie was getting fed up with the current state of affairs. Regardless, he knew that making lame excuses about the corner he'd painted himself into was just spinning his wheels.

The kids that hung with Jeeks weren't going to rest easy until they'd torn out anybody associated with Bison by the roots.

One of the hot-headed Jeeks kids finally noticed guy lighting up on top of the pile of bricks. "Hey, motherfucker! What you doing over there?"

The insolence and arrogance in the question were the kid's way of venting the irritation over letting his previous prey escape. But the answer was not what he expected.

"This is no place for kids to be loitering at all hours of the night. So piss off and run along home."

The guy responded unexpectedly in a commanding tone of voice, and beneath its sportive tone was an edge that must have sounded all the more barbed to these fearless kids. Kirie found himself growling under his breath. "Some kind of idiot, that guy is."

He knew the kids there in front of him ran with Jeeks. If this guy was looking to pick a fight with them, then he must have brass ones the size of boat anchors. If not, he was the biggest fool on the planet.

"If you knew who you was talking to, old man, you'd think twice about opening that big mouth of yours." The kid went on, trying to salve his bruised honor as a member of the Jeeks gang. "If you don't, then we'd be happy to teach you. Try not to wet yourself." Obviously feeling he'd been dissed, the kid was going to give back

twice what he was given. "It's too late to go crying to mama."

They were determined now to get it on with him. Looking to blow off some steam, the guy must have seemed the perfect target. "Yeah, that's right. You're talking to the Jeeks gang."

"Jeeks?" the guy shot back with a lack of affect that bordered on disappointment. "Sorry, don't know him. Is he the one who changes your nappies every night, then?"

Even sans the sarcasm, his manner of speaking suggested this was something other than a bad joke, and Kirie could not but gape at him. *He's gotta be wrong in the head*, he thought, the words nearly coming out in a gasp of disbelief.

"You don't know? You don't know the Jeeks gang? Just how stupid are you?"

"It's okay. If he doesn't know then we'll teach him."

"Damn straight. Within an inch of his fucking life."

The kids had already gotten their hackles up.

And yet the guy spoke again. "You think you know the slums. This is different." He was taking things at his own pace, right up to the end.

"Come on down, old man. We're gonna put a plug in that mouth of yours and tear you a new one."

"Okay, okay. Let's play, then. Time's a-wasting." The guy descended from the pile of rubble.

A laser knife tore through the darkness. Instead of staggering backwards in a panic, he nimbly stepped aside, grabbed the kid's slashing arm and delivered a solid blow in return. Then, catching the kid off balance, he mercilessly slammed a roundhouse kick against his body.

A strange shadow fell around them. *No way*. Sheer amazement. *No fucking way!* They must be dreaming.

It wasn't simply a difference in physical constitutions. That kind of precise parry and attack caught everybody by surprise. They staggered back and gaped. The "Jeeks" way of doing things was to track down and corner their prey, then gang up and hit where it was weakest. They didn't dawdle. They made up for their physical shortcomings with numbers and delivered the pain, so that the one pleading for mercy, blubbering like a baby, crawling away a misshapen wreck, was always the prey.

But this well-practiced game plan had been easily turned around by a single guy—

Draped in the darkness, Kirie murmured to himself. "*Holy freaking cow.*"

"An eye for an eye, that's the law of the slums. And while we're at it, the same thing goes for muscle and bone." The guy nonchalantly stepped into the light of the dingy streetlamp, as if stepping out of the dark wings and into the spotlight.

"It's the same to me either way. If you plan on running away, now's the time." He slightly curled the corners of his mouth. "Otherwise, how about we go at it until we're hacking up blood?" he asked, laughing with gay abandon.

Friday night.

An unusual moon rainbow arced across the sky of the deep, still night. In a room in the broken-down building they used as their safe house and headquarters, the now legendary members of Bison idled away the long and tedious hours.

Once upon a time, these ruffians had made names for themselves, running wild in the slums, turning the place upside down. But for the time being they'd reformed, no longer baring tooth and claw to every provocation. Or at least that was how the casual onlooker now perceived them.

The employment rate was miserable for the kids who spent morning

and night pursuing gang rivalries, leaving the slums chronically Shorthanded for labor. Setting aside the actual *quality* of the jobs, putting food on the table like "regular people" wasn't a problem.

Granted, as slum dwellers they had no idea what "regular people" expected in terms of living standards.

Even without dreams or desires, laboring under the weight of impotence and stagnation, human beings had to eat. Hunger constitutes the foundation in man's hierarchy of needs. Nobody in the slums wished for catered meals and six-course dinners, but nobody wished to starve and die a dog's death, either.

Food was not distributed equally, but rather according to hard work, and it was only when they hit their late twenties, when the high spirits of youth had grown stale, that they came to grips with this painful reality. Though this reckoning no doubt came to them faster than they ever expected.

Passing around a bottle of "tripper," a hard, hallucinatory stout, Kirie paused and spoke, as if the thought had suddenly occurred to him, "Did you hear? There's a market opening in Mistral."

"A market?" Sid queried, surprise evident in his eyes. "A Pet Auction, you mean?"

Kirie nodded curtly. "The word is, this time it's Academy-manufactured pets. They're positively jumping up and down with excitement, including the new money types in Kahn and Regina. Rumor has it the bid prices will be ten times the usual."

Where in the world had he heard that? They all fancied themselves street-wise bastards but Kirie was always the first one in the know.

"Pedigreed pure bloods, eh?" Guy said to himself.

"Ain't got nothing to do with us," Luke shot back.

"Not to compare us to those Academy-manufactured pets or nothing, but given the time and money, plus a little spit and polish,

and we wouldn't turn out half bad neither. Aside from a bit of an attitude problem. Eh, Riki?"

Kirie turned his mismatched gray and blue eyes on Riki and laughed. As if to express his lack of interest in the subject, Riki took a swig of stout. This overt display of attitude made Kirie knit his brows. After all, being ignored in front of everybody was more irritating than being disagreed with.

Even back when Bison had swatted him aside as a precocious outsider, they'd never dissed him the way Riki did. Riki's behavior towards him felt like a hard slap in the face.

Son of a—

Grinding his back teeth, Kirie recalled the night Guy had unexpectedly brought Riki here to their customary hangout. They'd all been too surprised to say anything for a long second or two, and then, in the next instance, everybody was repeating his name in warm and oddly raised voices.

"*Riki—!*"

"*Riki?*"

"*They said Riki? Seriously?*"

Kirie knew him. There before his very eyes were the black hair and eyes that suggested actual Academy-manufactured quality. This was the man who'd once been called the "Charisma" of the slums.

Kirie could even now recall the inexpressible, almost intoxicating sensation that had overcome him, and it was all because of that night three days ago. It'd been burned into his retinas, whether by pure chance or inevitable fate: the man who'd led Bison was the one who went toe to toe with the kids who called Jeeks their leader—the same Jeeks who'd set himself up as the exterminator of Bison—and had subsequently whipped their asses.

"Ironic," he'd have to call it. No, a godsend. Seeing this living legend a second time, this legend that he'd never believed he'd meet again, thrilled Kirie to the core of his being in a manner that was different

from the other members of Bison.

But he hadn't made a big deal about what had happened that night in front of everybody. So why did Riki turn a cold shoulder only to him? Was it because, among the gang members, Kirie's was the only face that Riki didn't know? Perhaps the legend wasn't comfortable striking up an overly familiar conversation on their first meeting.

But even after taking these factors into consideration, Kirie wasn't mollified. As a result, he dug in his heels and withdrew from the chit-chat as well. He didn't understand it, though. Perhaps Riki had taken a disliking to him; he'd had that feeling since the first time they met. Or perhaps somebody had whispered something in his ear. Nobody had said anything right to his face.

The severity of the look Riki flashed him had an edge to it that couldn't but leave any other impression. A sarcastic or biting comment would have been more welcome, because in that case, a comeback would have been possible. But Riki wasn't giving him an opening.

Far from it. Kirie was being completely snubbed, a fact he found thoroughly depressing. He narrowed his eyes in anger. Apparently blind to all of this, Riki made no attempt to lower his gaze as he stared off into the distance. Kirie scowled as he considered a cutting retort, all the more pissed off.

Right then, as if waiting for exactly the right moment, Guy softly spoke. "What's with you, Kirie? You want your own personalized collar?"

Kirie lightly clucked his tongue at the lost opportunity. He took a breath to collect his senses and answered with a forced laugh. "Yeah sure. Add in an owner who can keep me supplied with this Dublin hard ale and I'll lick the soles of his feet."

That comment got under Riki's skin somewhere. His indifferent expression suddenly turned so cold that Kirie unconsciously clenched his fists even as he flinched. For reasons he could not understand, Riki's steely gaze made his blood run cold. Feeling the full brunt of Riki's displeasure, his pent-up frustrations were about

burst into flames.

What's with this motherfucker!

Kine was pinned down by that frosty, silent gaze, and he simply couldn't find his voice despite his suffocating sense of indignation. All that remained was the personal contempt for his own awkwardness, and it was burning a hole in the pit of his stomach.

At that point, sitting to his right, Luke spoke with the whisper of a smile creasing his lips. "Hey, wake up, you dumb bastard. You're not seriously thinking about becoming some half-breed slum pet, are you?"

Nobody laughed. Because it was God's honest truth, not something people joked or made snide remarks about. In an obvious effort to dispel the unpleasant atmosphere, Norris interrupted in a vexed tone of voice. "The hell with that. What's with Jeeks and those little twerps of his?"

"Yeah, yeah. I got no idea why, but lately they've been really riding our asses."

"But I heard that just the other day they ran into a chap who beat the crap out of them." Calling it a rumor, Kirie related the information casually while stealing a glance at Riki.

Riki didn't react in the slightest.

"Well, that'd be a godsend. In any case, we should take the opportunity to kick some heads in. For starters, it'd settle things down around here."

With no indication as to whether he was listening or not, Riki lowered his eyes and drained the last of the stout from the bottle. The alcohol touched his mouth with a particular bitterness that stabbed at his tongue, yet this time the grating sensation struck Riki in a way that was different than usual. This time it was vicious and heavy and dark, in a way that was hard to describe.

Must be just my imagination.

Riki slowly swallowed the stout as he turned the thought over in his mind. When it came to warming his chest, it was better to get high on spirits a bit smoother on the tongue, but this was the best he could expect around here.

Between the bouts of gang warfare, he'd stepped back and put some guarded distance between himself and the wild-eyed kids who prowled the Pleasure Quarters for thrills and profits. But that didn't mean he'd abandoned "the cause" and gone over to earning his daily bread by the sweat of his brow.

Every year more young bloods poured into Area 9, but the slums, running like arteries through the heart of Ceres, had already hardened, and none of them possessed the strength of will to tear open the chest and drain the infection from its vital organs.

Without a generous sugar daddy there was no one to scrounge money from. These chaps, who were hardly able to extract any kind of enjoyment from their own youth, found that the luxurious, hallucinatory ale was nothing but a dream.

A dream. Even the stout they were working on now. Three days earlier, Luke had run across a stock of supposed "class goods" somewhere, but that didn't mean he'd sampled the merchandise first to ascertain its true worth. The stout was brewed as an off-label stimulant. It was moonshine.

Downing a slug in one shot instead of working at it was a risky business. If a chap's luck was running against him, it was far from a mere "bad trip": after a good deal of thrashing about and writhing in pain, the end result was death by suffocation.

That accounted for stout's bad reputation among the alkaloid-based intoxicants, and undoubtedly was the reason that the very worst of the brand should suit the slums so well.

Still, once a fellow got thoroughly wasted, it was a trip with no toll booths and no off-ramp. He'd sit there in a phantasm-filled euphoria, his lips forming the mere shape of words, the breath

escaping his taut lips sounding like crushed rock underfoot.

The stout shouldered the burdens of slum kids who had no other means of venting their frustrations. Even speaking truth to power, their souls remained unquenched. And always, there was the problem of being lightly cast aside, of being summed up in the simple phrase: "*That's just the way the world fucking is.*"

The stout liberated them, albeit temporarily, from that existence. No one told them a chap shouldn't use off-label pharmaceuticals just because they "might be dangerous."

The conversation having exhausted itself, the empty silences that followed slowly began to dam up the spaces between them.

At that point, some bee having buzzed under his bonnet, Luke roused himself and turned his glazed eyes on Riki. "What's with you, man? Sitting there on your ass, getting shit-faced on this piss. I mean it, you look pathetic."

Something seemed to be lurking in Luke's muddied gaze as his eyes crawled over Riki's body like a cat's tongue licking its fur.

"Don't mean to say you've turned into some old fart telling the same old war stories all day, though."

It was always like this. There was a rawness in the voice and a look in the eyes that was enough to scorch his hair. Riki put it down to the stout beginning to kick in and paid him no mind.

Heartbeats slowly measured out the time, virility gradually returning as strength at last flowed back into the limbs with a strange, undulating rhythm. Sitting back against the sofa in a relaxed manner, Riki stretched his arms and legs, and took a deep breath.

He closed his eyes. He could see nothing, hear nothing. He felt only the faint stirrings of something akin to slumber. His body and soul became enchanted by the mesmerizing sensations, and all the more blissfully beguiled with each breath.

The darkness at the back of his eyes stirred. As a kaleidoscope of colors leapt into his vision, Riki lost all interest in everything but the pleasant numbness filling him.

And then Guy, glancing over his shoulder at Riki, seemed to catch in the faint smile playing across his face a glimpse of those three missing years, and lowered his gaze.

Chapter 3

The slums is a monster that devours the soul of youth and spits out the gristle.

Somebody must have said so at one time or another, for all the residents of Area 9 knew from experience that it was the honest truth. Yet those who tried to leave the slums were met with a deep-rooted scorn, and an envy more scathing than an ordinary man could imagine.

Rotting on the vine, the aging drifters—for there was nothing left to them but to grow old—had no dreams to consume. This was not necessarily good or bad. The day-to-day reality that was their only inheritance was worse than eating sand.

Yet they poured slanderous abuse upon those trying to destroy that painful reality, a backlash that mercilessly ate away at the soul. It was the dilemma.

A man could not fly without dreams, but a man who never flew never knew the fear of falling. Any hope of progress was abandoned. Although this truth was hidden from no one, these people would clip their wings and throw them away, saying that if they did not, they would surely die.

The reality forming the "walls" of the slums was that thick, the darkness that black.

Consequently, those who dared to challenge those walls, even knowing they would be slapped down, were derisively called "Martians," after the Roman god of war. Drinking themselves into depravity in rages of self-pity, those hiding behind these words knew the shoes of these "Martians" would never fit them.

Riki had once said the same thing over and over, like a pet phrase. He expressed his true thoughts only to Guy, the pairing partner that was his "better half." *Someday I'm going to kiss the slums goodbye.*

Until then, everybody who'd expressed the same sentiments and left

the slums behind had returned with fallen spirits and drooping shoulders after barely a month. Without a touch of fear Riki put conviction into his words and looked forward to the future.

Someday. For sure.

Four years before.

Three months had passed since Bison unexpectedly broke up like a plane disintegrating in mid-air. Late one night, Riki staggered into Guy's hole in the wall.

"Hey, you okay?"

As soon as he opened the door, Guy caught a face full of alcohol-laden breath and had to turn away. Even when he drank, Riki wasn't a guzzler, but right now he smelled to Guy like he'd showered in booze.

Seeing Riki in this state aroused in Guy a high degree of anxiety. Before even inviting him in Guy reflexively knit his brows. "Riki, what's going on?"

Clearly not giving a damn about his own besotted condition, Riki leaned forward, swaying, the corners of his mouth turning up. "A little present," he said, pressing something against Guy's chest.

Guy had heard the rumors, but when it came to a same-label knockoff, not to mention the real thing, this brand of stout sported the astronomical prices that not even God could afford. He swallowed hard. "Where the hell did you get this?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Riki chuckled with a suppressed smile. It could be the real thing, or he was strung out on skid row home brew. Looking at Riki's slack lips and sloppy mouth, Guy couldn't begin to comprehend what was on his mind. As if to nip his anxieties in the bud, he spoke carefully. "You certainly seem in a good mood. You strike it rich?"

He probed gently. Riki cast himself on the one good bed like he

owned the place and mumbled, "Yeah, something like that." He lifted his heavy, bleary eyes and snorted through his nose. "Still, the Roget Renna Vartan is bloody impressive, too."

"This some kind of joke?"

Huh? I just happened to come into a rare vintage you wouldn't *think* of praying for and wanted to share the joy. Shit, you're not saying I pinched it, are you?"

With that, Riki twisted his body and laughed, his voice approaching a screech. Guy was uncertain whether the loud laughter could be attributed to the drink, or a kink of stone-cold sober self-derision, and he couldn't quell a growing sense of foreboding.

If his memory was not mistaken, this was probably the first time in a long time that Riki made a killing cruising the Midas night. That's what accounted for his sudden change in appearance.

Guy plunged his hands into Riki's pockets and found them bulging with a prepaid credit cards. "You've got more than enough, right? Let's bug out of here before you roll snake eyes."

Riki had responded with a playful kick to Guy's ass. "Lady luck is loving me long and hard tonight. At a time like this, it's only good manners to love her back the same way. You take off, Guy. Myself, I'm up for another round."

Riki laughed fearlessly and disappeared into the crowds. That was the last Guy had seen of him that day.

At the time, Guy hadn't been particularly worried. Though edging himself pretty far out on the limb, the unusually jittery Riki still struck him as the last person to try pulling some dumb stunt. Guy was sure he'd head off in high spirits and find some dive to drink the night away in.

But when Guy thought about it now, that night had been the start of something—*something* had happened out there, but Riki showed not the slightest inclination of saying what.

A month later Riki dropped the bombshell: "*Guy, I'm quitting Bison.*"

Back in the day, before making itself king of the mountain in the slums, Bison had been formed to protect a bunch of newcomers who enjoyed no patronage and had no connections in the colonies from getting eaten alive by the wily old rogues.



The powerful feasted on the weak. They fought, therefore they

were. That was the painfully transparent logic of power in the slums. The strong inherited the earth—how could they not?

Those who prevailed and advanced to the next round in the struggle for existence earned the right to loudly proclaim their own righteousness. Fawners and whiners need not apply. Trust no one. For good or ill, those who couldn't carve out their own place in the world would be plucked raw.

Best to become strong and avoid getting screwed over. That was the rule of the slums. Even if weak individually, great power arose from combining the many as one. If those who individually would be left destitute pooled their resources and worked in union, they could clean house. Riki had become the catalyst, the linchpin that made it happen.

"Lying low and playing it safe guarantees nothing." That had been Riki's ironclad policy since his days at the Guardian foster center.

But Riki also said, "That doesn't mean I've got the slightest inclination to catch flack for complete strangers." Aside from finally deciding to become—out of sheer necessity—the *de facto* leader of Bison, he did not have any particular desire for the position nor any attachment to it.

He simply couldn't tolerate people trying to twist his arm, people wearing kid gloves that concealed mailed fists. Or the cajoling, bothersome buttinskies. Or the grifters who bought their salvation on the backs of others.

The affection Riki's acolytes had for him burned with a white hot flame, but with the sole exception of Guy, Riki's black eyes never blazed with an equal devotion towards them. In spite of this, Riki's presence was enchanting, and it excited in them a kind of euphoria.

And so Guy, and then Sid, and then Luke, because of him, Norris, hitched their fortunes to Riki and formed the pillars shouldering the throne of his charisma. They had their own desires. They dreamed their own dreams. And they aspired to dispatch the opposition and become top dog in the slums as well.

But once Riki abdicated, for whatever reason, no one had the desire to become his successor, and that's why Bison disintegrated. As outsiders looked on in amazement, it faded away into that good night with nary a struggle.

Isn't he the one rushing in where angels fear to tread? The slums were talking, and the way the envious rumors were flying about, it was believed he must've really been in the money. A short while later, just when everyone was beginning to doubt they'd see his face again, he suddenly showed up with a crate of expensive spirits the likes of which the slums had never seen before.

While greeting all the commotion with a big smile, he was not intoxicated in the slightest by the looks of envy and jealousy he received. Far from it. Guy and the others thought they detected something unfathomable in Riki's black eyes, the intensity of a swollen and insatiable hunger.

Not only Guy and the others, but everybody in the slums wanted to know the source of his riches.

"Yo, Riki. You're not eating at the trough of one of those new money types, are you?"

"No way. You think there's anybody who could put a muzzle on a wild stallion like Riki?"

"So, what's the real story, then?"

Cross-examining him, tossing around the needling sarcasm and barbed jokes, Riki made no effort to respond other than with vague, noncommittal answers.

They didn't press him any further than this. Even when they were no longer hanging out together 24/7, Riki was still the same old Riki, and so provoked no more than his expected share of antipathy and jealousy.

No, that wasn't it.

His conspicuous jet black hair and obsidian eyes, along with the vivid aura sealed within his supple limbs, had become more intense.

Riki was free from the shackles that Bison had become, and people even thought that he had reclaimed some of the brilliance of his true nature.

Nobody put these thoughts into words, but they had come to realize that the disparity between themselves and Riki had become stark. They half-unconsciously kept themselves in check so that all their chickenshit envy wouldn't end up warping their outlook on life, wouldn't rend in two the chains binding themselves and Riki together.

Guy couldn't help but worry. Not as a member of Bison but as Riki's pairing partner, constantly at his side.

"Hey, Riki. Seriously, you don't want to be sticking your head out like this."

What the hell are you looking at me like that for, all of a sudden?"

"Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes. Gimme an answer!"

Guy fretted because he wished to be Riki's emotional cornerstone. That's what he wanted, and that's how he hoped things would continue to be. But then where did this strange sense of irritation come from? Or the illusion that the bonds connecting Riki and himself were unraveling bit by bit? Or that Riki was not even aware of his growing unease?

Riki sighed deeply and spoke in a subdued voice. "You know, Guy, there aren't opportunities just lying around everywhere. Especially chances for guys like us to see the light of day." He narrowed his black eyes slightly, eyes steeped with alcohol. "That stout I snuck in here, I was going to stretch it out and make it last longer but I got tired of the crappy buzz it got me."

He quietly spoke his mind about things he'd been storing up inside him.

"If I'm going to see the same old dreams, I want to see a damned good show. Just sitting around with my thumb in my mouth and a wistful look on my face till the end of time is a waste. We both

know tons of blokes like that. You know?"

He knew what he was asking.

"Guy, I hate it here. If I stay like this forever, I'm going to rot from the inside out. It's enough to give me the fucking willies."

He knew the weight of reality.

He knew everything inside and out.

"I'm going to crawl out of here and see for myself," he said aloud, as if to demonstrate the strength of his unwavering will.

Guy didn't know what had spurred Riki to these extremes. Riki had discovered something about his place in the world, but Guy never pressed him about it, perhaps because he was afraid that doing so would rupture the link that they shared. So he simply gave a laconic nod. "Yeah, sure—"

His lips curled slightly as the sharp spines of some invisible thorn stuck in his throat.

Midas. Area 9. Ceres. These backstreets have had a past once, but they possessed no future.

Nothing geographical separated Ceres and Midas. Even though Ceres and Midas shared the same earth and the same sky, it so happened that Ceres "mongrels" didn't share the same identity card held by the citizens of Midas. And it was that difference alone that made the Ceres slums and Midas galaxies apart.

It wasn't the flocking together of criminals and drifters that birthed that characteristic heap of refuse in the slums. The lot known as Area 9 did not exist on any map or any registration card of any resident of Midas, and that's the way it had been, for as long as anyone could remember.

What was uncharted bred discord that was out of sight, but not out of mind. Ceres served as a constant reminder to the citizens of

Midas, throbbing away in the corners of their eyes, disciplining their actions like threat of the branding iron.

Bound in both body and spirit, the lives of the residents of the Pleasure Quarters were far from agreeable. Shackled by inheritance to the class system known as "Zein," they were not free to choose occupations in disregard to class differences. They were also not free to love whom they chose to love.

Nevertheless, rather than causing trouble or bucking the establishment and losing their ID cards, they all knew that the far better course was to follow the rules and keep their mouths shut. The despised trash of Ceres were right there in front of them, scraping by in the slums, too low to the ground to reach up and grasp their own bootstraps, let alone pull themselves up by them.

The existence of the lower depths perpetually hovering at the peripheries of their vision served as a ready confirmation of their own feelings of superiority and revulsion.

To the citizens of Midas, their greatest humiliation was not the invasive restrictions on their speech and conduct, nor was their indignation directed towards any flagrant abuse of their human rights. It the thought of being stripped bare and dumped in Ceres.

To live in Ceres was to no longer be a human being.

The fact was imprinted on the basal ganglia of their brains and permeated every cell of their bodies. It was the warning of Midas itself laid bare, so that they would not make the same mistake twice.

A revolt had once broken out in Midas that threatened to overturn the established order. The chains of control and servility imposed by the digital overlord were severed. The revolutionaries seeking to bring about a new order based on the pursuit of liberty and human dignity occupied Area 9 with the goal of achieving independence.

"This is not a revolution but a reformation," they declared. "The era when men serve and submit to machines is over."

But when, from where, and how they would provision themselves with the capital and materials necessarily for the venture, along with the data and intel necessary to challenge Midas, no, Tanagura, directly? In Area 9 they only had access to those human and material resources belonging to a people accustomed to a besieged existence.

The revolutionaries believed that nobody would be compelled. There would be no distinctions between high and low. The expectation was that everyone would be treated equally as individuals. Ceres was going to become that kind of utopia.

"Cast off your shackles! Demand true freedom!" was the battle cry they raised. Promising a rebirth of human rights and budging not an inch in their convictions, their power and passion were astounding.

Like a raging bonfire, the sparks flying up from Area 9 touched off conflagrations in other areas. The long-repressed, smoldering emotions burst into flames. The grudges and resentments stored up until this moment were expressed with wide-ranging acts of sabotage. Every nook and cranny seethed with open criticism of the "system."

From the outset Midas government officials downplayed the severity of the crises. "They won't last ten days." But eventually they fell victim to the effects of the revolution as customer traffic dried up, and they were at last forced to come to terms with the seriousness of the situation.

Perhaps they were dimly aware of the flickering shadows of Commonwealth allies lurking behind the ringleaders who had dared bare their teeth to the "system." Even though their hearts were roiling in a tempest of indignation, at least on the surface they did not attempt to force the issue.

The end result was that instead of countering through brute-force and eradicating Area 9, Midas simply announced that their residential records would be deleted. That day the echoing cries of joy reverberated through Ceres. *Victory!* They had done it!

It was almost a letdown that the announcement from Midas was so

magnanimous, and some did exchange doubtful looks. But such doubts were lost in the cries of victory, the back-slapping and drunken exuberance. Without a single sacrifice—without a single loss of life—they had won their rights, their freedom, and their independence. That was something they could be proud of.

However, in the end they were left to wonder: What did we really win? And: Why was Midas so quick to recognize the independence Ceres?

The excitement of victory soon abated, and the revolutionaries counted the days and months and began to think things through. They had escaped the rule of Midas but now came face to face with the demands of their own existence. The harshness of a reality that up until now was not even a figment in their imagination began to sink in.

No one who comes here will be rejected. That was their article of faith.

Together with their oppressed and downtrodden compatriots, together with like-minded people, they would build the future together. Yes, they were that naive. The Commonwealth's surreptitious assistance had been necessary for their independence, and perhaps they had not completely realized what it meant to stand without it.

Of course they were grateful for the freely-offered help of their Commonwealth supporters in raising the banner of human rights. But it never occurred to them that their very purpose, of breaking the stranglehold of Tanagura, the "metallic city" stained by the corrupting poison of Midas, was being subverted by the Commonwealth's flattering actions and agitating words.

As a result, before they could even establish their "ideal system," they were overrun by those bewitched with the idea of Ceres being "free." The vast majority of them arrived with no firm convictions backing their beliefs. Just the hope that by going to Ceres "something" would change, that "something" would happen.

If one wanted to lead, one had to understand how profoundly young they were. Ignorant. Running off with a picture of perfection

held in their heads, they were blind to the cold, hard reality at their feet. Their fatal flaw was the lack of a leader who could make decision firmly, without second thoughts, without getting lost in his emotions.

The first reality released upon Ceres was chaos. Next came: "That's not what you promised!"

And: "What's in it for me?"

And: "I'm not doing a shitty job like that!"

And so the individual discontent and grumbling continued. Eventually, impatience with things not being as imagined was replaced by irritation with things not turning out as they expected.

"Unshackled freedom" did not mean doing whatever a person felt like without outside interference. To take up the reins of freedom, it was necessary to respect the rule of law and to cooperate.

Otherwise, a person could cry "freedom" until he was blue in the face and his ideals would remain idle visions.

The independence of an unpredictable mob rule was independence without meaning. For hard-won freedom to take root, time and patience were necessary. They were a simple bunch and should have learned the most important of these lessons through their experiences. If they had, circumstances may have changed for the better.

But while the so-called "professional" activists from the Commonwealth were supporting the cause of freedom, in Ceres, where its tempests were stilling and fevers rapidly abating, they still remained strangers and foreigners to each other. They had been given independence from Midas, but carrying out their original plan met with a number of roadblocks, leaving Ceres in a state of deep distress.

Nevertheless, as bad as things got there, their thoughts were no doubt soothed by the fact that they at least had a place to go home to.

Midas began chipping away at such loftiness and the people of Ceres began to learn the true cost of freedom. Midas raised no objections to those who wished to resettle in Ceres, and now Midas refused their repatriation on the grounds that their residency records had been destroyed and no longer existed.

The door was not closed completely on them, though there was always the threat that they would attempt to tear the system down a second time. For those who wished it, Midas made no bones of employing such brainwashing techniques as "memory adjustment" and the like.

The main point was to save face vis-à-vis the Commonwealth as the satellite city of Tanagura. Midas did not spare the rod or spare the child. Area 9 was ringed with sensors and isolated, such that not even a rat could cross over undetected from Ceres.

These measures served as additional warnings to the citizens of Midas.

The dreams of the revolution broken, the shoulders of the revolutionaries sagged and their hearts grew heavy. There was no way around, over, or through this wall of massive rejection. They wasted away in Ceres, dragging their feet, staggering under the weight of regret and despair.

Right under their noses was Midas, clad in its gaudy neon robes day and night. The harlot teased at their hearts but would never invite them back inside the citadel.

Eventually, the tides of lethargy eroded the remnants of the collective soul like a terminal disease worming its way through the marrow of Ceres brick by brick. Even when the eras changed and the sensor fences were removed, it showed no signs of stopping. Over the years, the sickness had burrowed into the degenerating slums.

Riki set off fully aware of the past, but with his eyes set firmly on the future. When he'd left Guy he'd made a vow. "Only a loser stops

to look back."

But then one night, three years to the day since Riki left the slums (or rather, vanished from Guy's presence), he suddenly returned. Guy was caught totally off guard, and could only stand there, eyes wide, stammering, unable to put two words together.

"Well, you seem to be doing well."

Riki flashed his familiar grin. He'd put on a few inches, matured enough to look almost like a completely different person. His once raw intensity was remarkably subdued and his slender limbs were smart and trim. But it was his eyes that Guy was struck by, which were sober to the point of being cold.

"Riki... it's really you?" Guy asked, despite himself. He had to know for certain.

His former mates were energized in ways both good and bad about Riki's return to the slums. To one degree or another, everyone wanted a peek into the vacuum of those three missing years. Needless to say, it wasn't long before the attention of all the eyes in the slums focused like laser beams on him.

The word went forth that the "Charisma" of the slums had returned a beaten dog. All manner of abuse was spoken behind his back.

"Serves him right!"

"Didn't return with honor, that's for sure."

"A bloody shame, him living in disgrace like that."

They all pointed fingers and laughed him to scorn. Back when the name "Bison" took the world by storm, Riki was the rare, unattainable flower who'd entrusted his heart to a single partner. Even after falling from grace, this flower that bloomed in the swamp of the slums was still a lotus.

The flower had unexpectedly fallen to the ground at their feet. Rather than picking it up and loving it, they would rather trample it into the mud. Countless numbers had become slaves to that kind of

perverse pleasure.

And yet Riki held his tongue and didn't answer back, despite how much derision he was showed with. No matter how blatantly he was provoked. Like water off a duck's back.

The members of Bison were not immune to this frustrating sense of serenity, this turning of the cheek to all assaults without wincing. The man slinking back to the slums with his broken dreams had at least dragged all their shared, smoldering feelings *somewhere else* for a while.

Such were the unpalatable fruits of hopelessness, the painful spasms of self-contempt, and on top of that, the dark clouds of madness gathering in the lower depths of despair. Common practice was to drown themselves in drugs and alcohol, seal themselves within the shell of the self, and flee the visions of the past by briefly escaping into that waking dream.

But Riki had changed. Gone was the white-hot intensity that once scorched whatever it touched. Far from it. Now, his eyes only seemed to look down at the rest of them. And there was the manner in which he drained his glass, as if perpetually lost in his thoughts. There was *something* about that relaxed quietude.

There was no way for Guy to discern the heart of the tight-lipped Riki. Yet to the commonplace assertion that "It's all for the best," Riki's transfiguration had brought about so many profound and radical changes that he could only reflexively nod his head in agreement.

Chapter 4

Midas. Area 3. Mistral Park was a large convention center complex lined with exhibition pavilions of various shapes and sizes.

Beginning with "Casino Row," Lhassa's main attraction, and continuing onto its "entertainment establishments," visitors then found on the flanks of the Pleasure Quarters what might be called (with a somewhat different interpretation) the true face of Midas.

Auction day approached. Midas was caught up in a fever quickly exceeding its normal hustle and bustle. The animated voices reached even into the oval plaza, which was otherwise subdued during the daylight hours.

As Kirie promised, rumors of the Auction flowed fast and thick, down to the pubs and dives of Ceres that could not have less to do with it. Perhaps this was because Academy-manufactured products were again making their debut after a five-year absence.

Riki and his mates were hanging out at Herma's crib.

"What do you say? C'mon, let's go," implored Kirie, climbing into Sid's lap. "Anyway, watching is free. It's nice to stand on the sidelines now and then really cut loose for a change, don't you think? And if we're in luck, we might earn ourselves some beer money."

Sid must have found getting singled out by Kirie not altogether disagreeable, because he was getting into the mood about the time Kirie started tugging on his earlobes. He looked to Riki, as if asking for the permission of their former leader. "Yo, Riki. What about it?"

Showing little interest in the Auction or in going anywhere, period, Riki replied curtly. "If you want to go, then go."

Sid reacted with a small shrug. Kirie furrowed his brows, a sullen look on his face. "What's up with you? It's like people say, you spend all day sucking lemons. At any rate, what else you got to do with your free time?" Kirie lit into them, berating the timidity of the

gang members who up to now had always given Riki's preferences first priority. "You actually got some reason for not wanting to go?"

When Riki turned toward his attacker, Kirie added, tightening his lips and narrowing his eyes, "Maybe there's somebody there you're not so eager to meet?"

"Whatever." Riki said, as if the whole thing had become too mindlessly bothersome to care about.

"Then it's settled. Not a bad idea to hit the town together now and then." Kirie said sardonically, flashing a complacent smile.

"I don't care for this asshole. " Riki spat with a sideways glance, too low to be overheard. Was it because, not even seventeen, Kirie's strangely affected, know-it-all attitude stuck in his craw? Or perhaps it was being treated so presumptuously by a kid three years his junior? No, that wasn't it either.

What Riki couldn't stand about him was not the way Kirie fixed him with those oddly mismatched eyes of his, but rather that behind those eyes lingered a carbon copy of himself from three years before.

Kirie didn't know that he was a frog stuck at the bottom of a well. He didn't even comprehend the nature of this dumping ground in which he vented his excessive passions. He grasped only the illusions crawling out of the bottom of a bottle of stout as he gasped for air.

At first none of this had occurred to Riki, who took little note of Kirie aside from his curiously mismatched eyes, but at some point he started seeing a shadow of his own immature self back when he was a kid. When he was Kirie's age he'd surely flaunted the same kind of attitude. Take himself back five years and there'd be no denying it.

Once he'd realized this, the memories sprang up out of the past, entwining themselves around him, condensing those three blank years in one fell swoop. It was unbearable, seeing this reflection of his former self that had no logical reason to exist. *Unbelievable. To*

think I once stood in his same shoes. They were strong feelings that made him unwittingly grit his back teeth and choke down the bitter bile.

He'd returned to his own haunts because there he could take a deep breath and relax without everybody's eyes on him. He could slake his constricted, aching throat. Stretch his stiff limbs. Do what he wanted, when he wanted. Savor his freedom.

It was strange. Around the time he announced he was leaving Bison, the daily dullness of life lacked any impetus to change, and it made him want to throw up. But now it was unbearably dear to him.

Despite the abandoned thing that now sneered at the weaknesses he wished to heal, despite the humiliation of being exposed as a loser, Riki now had a more persistent and demanding hunger. Yet nothing had changed. With his frazzled pride, his ripened body now rotting on the vine, it'd be a long time before the senses of this dull and tarnished Varja returned in full.

Still, the past he'd never expected to leave behind him gradually seemed to be fading away as he submerged himself in the fevered swamp of his former crib, surrounded by all its brutality.

But considering the changes he'd gone through, why did his old mates strike him as so immutable? Riki had the feeling he was letting his pride and arrogance show and had come to regret it far too late.

Only Kirie's words left a bitter taste in his mouth. Chewing them up and forcing them down inflamed old wounds. Originally he'd hardly been the type to watch and wait, but if nothing else, those three years had taught him patience. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that his pride and stubbornness had been yanked out by the roots, and humility crammed down his throat.

The slander and scorn of the slums were peanuts in comparison. Nowadays, casting off the odd humiliation was nothing. These thoughts had in no small way prompted Riki to return to his old haunts.

And yet Kirie's presence alone struck the nerve that brought the burning past back to life. All the memories of his naive and arrogant youth, of playing the consummate delinquent, were vividly resurrected before his very eyes. His heart could know no peace. His eyes flashed with bitter anger and the mask of cool indifference was prone to slip.

Nine-thirty in the morning, Midas standard time, the day of the Auction. As if the excitement had spilled over from the night before, the Pleasure Quarters bustling with people. The weather was wonderful. Blue skies and not a cloud in the sky—weather perfectly appropriate for a carnival.

And among them, Kirie nipped at Riki's heels in a high state of agitation. "Hey, quit dragging your feet. Let's move it along!"

Guy observed Kirie as he walked with Riki toward Mistral Park. "Kirie's sure full of himself."

"That's because he's a kid."

"A kid, huh."

What's that clever smile supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Just something I remembered."

"What's that?"

"There was also a crop of Academy-manufactured pets that year we came to the Colony, and the place was really cooking. You were the one whooping it up and gee-whizzing about this, that, and the other thing."

Riki said nothing in return.

"That's who Kirie reminds me of. The two of you are peas in a pod."

"Don't put me in the same category as that little twerp."

"Ah, I see. *You're* so much more grown up. Speaking of which, you were so worried that *I'd* get lost that you held my hand and wouldn't let go the whole time. Hey, *ow!*"

"Shut up and keep walking."

"What're you hitting me for? All I'm doing is reminiscing about the good old days—"

"Enough's enough. So put a sock in it."

"Fine, fine."

The opening was still a while off and the road leading to the Auction grounds was everywhere jammed with the waves of people. The crowd was enough to exhaust Riki's patience.

With more wonder than sarcasm in his voice, Kirie looked on with wide eyes. "Look all these people! It's a goddamned people parade! How about we get things started already! It's hot as a bathhouse around here!"

Luke snorted with derision. "What it comes down to is, they're just a bunch of horny, fucked up, nouveau riche types. Aside from the fact that we fuck ourselves up on stout instead, there's no big difference between us and them."

"It's interesting, just the same. All these different kinds of people. You don't get to feast your eyes upon Academy-manufactured pets very often. I wonder what they're thinking, everybody flocking up to the display windows like that."

He wasn't asking this question of anyone in particular. But Kirie's gaze half-unconsciously sought out Riki's black eyes as he returned from the bustling throngs.



"So, Riki, what do you think?"

Riki would have normally turned indifferently and looked the other way, but this time, strangely enough, he fixed his gaze on Kirie's mismatched pair of eyes.

"At first, what everybody thinks: *If I had to do this every day*— That sort of thing. Then I take a look at the opening bids and my eyes bug out. A cold slap to the face. There're blokes here with the all the time and money in the world and blokes here with nothing. When all is said and done, it doesn't matter if you can't accept the distance between yourself and the privileged classes. You're forced to deal with it and that's what sticks in your craw."

"Well, what do you know. Once in a while, the strong, silent type opens his mouth and has something radical to say." Kirie looked at Riki with an almost startled expression and smiled a curious smile.

Guy and the others cast sideways glances at Kirie and speculated among themselves, each according to his own fancy.

"Hey, hey, there they go again."

"Whenever they meet, this is how they end up. So why don't they get along?"

"Idiot. The only radical thing here is that mouth of yours."

But they felt differently in their hearts: *Kirie never learns. He's about a century too young to go mouthing off to Riki.*

Riki let out a heavy sigh. "It's hardly that big of a deal, is it?"

"What? Being a few years older makes you a wise old fart?"

"Yeah, because you're always spouting off like wise-ass, wet-behind-the-ears kid you are."

"Huh. Give you three years and you're supposed to be some highfalutin man among men? When you've gone from the undisputed head of Bison In some piss-normal ordinary bloke? It's a real letdown, I'm telling you. Somebody must have got the jump on you. At least that's what it looks like to me."

Before he could say another word, Norris smacked Kirie up the side of his head.

"What's that for?"

"That's for being an idiot. Give us all a fucking break, okay?"

"What's wrong about telling things as they are, huh?"

Answering with the same swagger in his voice Riki said, "Yeah, I suppose you've been able to spout shit like that ever since you've been able to pull up your own pants, Kirie. But once the nice little security blanket you got here gets ripped away, it's gonna come back and bite you in the ass."

It was spoken dryly, but with a hard edge that rubbed Kirie raw. What Riki was really saying grated mockingly in his ears. *You got an awful big mouth for some runt kid picking at Bison's table scraps.*

He casually glanced at Sid and Norris and saw the bitter, knowing smiles playing across their faces. What was plainly tugging at Luke's lips need not be said. And Guy, who usually did something to intercede, only faintly sighed.

What—what's this? Kirie thought, in a spontaneous flash of anger. Unexpectedly seized by the illusion of losing his place in the world, his head ached down to the core.

"Just because I won't sell myself short!" A burst of anger burning with a sense of loss.

"In that case, shut your noisy mouth. It's hurting my ears," Riki said to his face, bluntly turning aside Kirie's inflamed and agitated gaze.

Only the space between them kept Riki and Kirie from locking horns. Here was heat of a completely different kind, a silence like the clashing of unblended colors.

Kirie fixed Riki with his gaze and didn't move a muscle. Or, to be more precise, it might be better to say that the shock of facing Riki's usually distracted black eyes head on for the first time left him unable to even blink. Cold sweat slowly soaked his back. His throat

grew helplessly parched under the weight of feeling indescribably oppressed.

"C'mon, Riki. Let's go." Spreading oil on the waters, Guy draped his arm around Riki's shoulders. That touch alone, and the icy gleam vanished from Riki's eyes.

Finally released from Riki's spell, a great feeling of relief welled up in Kirie's chest. Without really thinking about it, he moistened his lips with his tongue over and over.

"Hey, snap out of it. We're going."

All the joints in his body were still so unnaturally stiff that when Sid gave him a sharp jab in the back he stumbled forward.

"Fuck all, but it's a couple million years too soon for an amateur like you to go picking fights with Riki."

"Well, yeah. But at least he didn't wet himself."

"Didn't, did he? Only because they never locked eyes."

"You owe Guy a thank-you note."

And so they gave him a no-holds dressing down. Kirie's competitive instincts flared up again. "What do I have to be thankful to Guy for?" Kirie's quick recovery was superb.

"If you got to ask, then that's because you're still a kid."

They knocked him around once again. Kirie was getting downright pissed. *Quit calling me a kid! Three years between us don't make you a bunch of world-weary geezers!*

In every respect, the term "early bloomer" applied to Bison. All it took was for the gang's leader to throw in the towel and the rest of them opted for early retirement. Or rather it could be said that, to the extent that they showed no regrets, they had completely burned themselves out.

Why? Why were they still hanging together? With their reason for

existence, their foundation, having vanished?

"Shit!" Kirie spat out under his breath, glaring at the backs of Guy and Riki, walking side by side head of him. *Just you fucking wait and see! Give me a chance and I'll—*

Good fortune was not going to fall into his lap if he was just sitting around on his hands, and he knew from living in the slums that the opportunity wasn't going to present itself either. He'd heard rumors that Riki had left Bison to take a shot at something he'd happened into. At the time Riki was fifteen or sixteen. Whatever Riki could do, Kirie was sure he could do as well.

Nevertheless, Kirie furrowed his brows. He didn't really understand the connection between Riki and Guy. Theirs was obviously no ordinary relationship. It was common knowledge that they'd been physically involved since they'd been at Guardian, and that even while they were there, Riki's attachment to Guy had never been something to be taken lightly.

That's why when Kirie first got to know Guy—thanks to a good word from Sid—and found the lieutenant of the legendary Bison to be a normal, easy-going guy, he felt as if someone was pulling his leg. *What the hell is this? He's just an ordinary bloke! Don't look like no superman to me! All I have to do is knock this number two off his perch and—*

The gap between rumor and reality proved infuriating for Kirie, but when Riki returned to the slums, Kirie learned for the first time why Guy was his lieutenant. Even though it wasn't spelled out in so many words, the two of them clearly communicated on a deep level. Like it or not, he had to deal with the reality of the true meaning of the term "pairing partner," and the manifestation of feelings of jealousy that were difficult to express.

In Area 9, children up to the age of twelve were all reared together by the child care administrators of the Guardian foster center. The reason given was that the mortality rate of children in violent, dysfunctional environment of the slums was disproportionately high.

That was part of it, but at the root of the problem was the extremely low birth rate of girls compared to that of boys. This may have been due to a particular property of the planet known as Amoy, along with any number of other unknown factors.

Only in Midas—in Ceres—were there no population or eugenic controls in place. "Natural sex selection" had been declared a "basic right," as if to set in stone the rallying cries of human dignity raised at the time of its independence.

Consequently, the small number of girls were given preferential treatment over the boys, and those with any inclination to bear children could do so in an isolated and far more agreeable environment. Unlike the boys who were forced to be "independent" of Guardian at the age of thirteen, to the extent that they were capable of giving birth, girls were under no obligation to live in the infested slum colonies.

Naturally, as things turned out, approximately ninety-nine percent of the residents of the slums—even if limited to the *in utero* children alone—were males, the only sex capable of being born.

Accordingly, "families" in the form of "blood relationships" were nonexistent among the same-sex relationships that formed the foundation of life in the slums. And neither was there any concept of official or ceremonial "marriage."

Area 9—Ceres—had produced that kind of distorted and closed society. All the more reason that the citizens of Midas should live willingly like house pets within the giant cage that was the Pleasure Quarters, while at the same time scorning Ceres as "the slums."

But the human animal is a social one, and is driven to seek out a healing presence to quench the loneliness of life. Hence the "pairing partner," an inseparable "significant other" that existed beyond love and affection, beyond contracts or obligations, and was untroubled by the presence of no-strings-attached "sex friends." Even so, when choosing for "life," a compatible and sexually-available partner was preferred.

Who is the right one for me—?

There were not a few for whom such considerations could never surmount the high hurdle of their own idealism.

When Kirie decided to run with Bison at Sid's invitation, one big reason was that, although Bison was now more legend than reality, the name commanded considerable respect in the slums simply as a status symbol. In fact, they could call on so many favors that they could get by on the daily freebies alone if the inclination so struck them.

Because of this, though Kirie and Bison had crossed paths many times, not once had he been shaken down for his "lunch money." On these occasions, Guy had come across as a straight shooter. When Kirie reached out to them, he was turned down flat and sent away with a slap on the wrists.

Among the members, he was the only one Kirie couldn't win over, and that grated on his pride. "What's the matter? Can't get it up, eh?" Trying somehow to get Guy's goat, Kirie even challenged his manhood.

Guy answered in turn, cutting him to the core. "Nice try. But I don't go for little kids just out of their nappies."

Kirie had never forgotten that humiliation. "Son of a *bitch*. He thinks the whole fucking world revolves around him?"

"And who the hell do you think *he* is? He's Riki's life partner. The guy you're hitting on could have his pick of the litter. He's the one who's gonna do the choosing. Not you."

"Hey, don't take it so hard. Compared to Riki we're all kids."

It probably all started then. In the true sense of the term he became of aware of "Riki" as an extension of "Bison." Two years had passed since. Kirie was still treated as the runt of the pack, and he had never turned down the heat on the slow boil of emotions in his heart.

On the other hand, Riki considered Kirie a fucking pain in the neck.

The bile welling up in his gut could not be so easily quelled. This wasn't the first time Kirie's provocative attitude had gotten to him, and it wasn't exactly calming being jammed together with all these crowds either.

He was so overcome with disgust that he almost wanted to hurl. He walked along as if swept up in the human tide, and eventually the nausea in the pit of his stomach became a ball of scorching nettles. As he approached the "sampling" booths situated in the center of the plaza, his gut all but clenched up.

Within the walls of people were a collection of "pets" that constituted the "main attractions" of the auction. These were the "display items" put on show for the general public. During the auction itself, a great variety of pets would go on sale in each and every auction hall.

Inside resplendently furnished rooms that had been further partitioned into cubicles for each manufacturing center, the pets were hardly timorous as they awaited their turn. These were each center's debut "performers." The variety of sexes, skin, hair and eye color notwithstanding, the supple symmetry of their limbs and their graceful physiognomies did not disappoint. All their relative merits matched up across the board.

The latest hot-selling line was crossbred, humanoid lemur—tail included. Size and genetic mix were variegated, with each boasting its own unique and individualized coloring. Among them, "Exile" from the Galott company line stood out from the crowd with her refined appearance and the excellent pelt of her tail.

Along with Exile, all the Galott ornamental lemurs were neutered females. Luxia's "Melude" took a decidedly inferior position to the Galott line, but because they could be paired off and bred to produce numerically superior offspring, almost overnight a frenzied breeding fad had broken out among the region's newly moneyed and the Commonwealth's privileged classes.

The real eye-catchers among the potpourri of booths, the stars of the show, were the Academy-manufactured pets.

Translucent golden hair. Finely-textured white skin. Moist red lips. Delicate and youthful features that made sexual identity difficult to discern, but contradictorily, at the same time cast off a strange and alluring charm that sent a chill up the spine.

Of course the listed opening prices were ten times the average, putting them in a completely different league. Once the auction started the bids would undoubtedly exceed that several times over. For those who put their hearts and souls into "refined works of art" and spared neither time nor money, they certainly had reason to think so.

Long-renowned masterpieces known as "pure blood breeds" were sold in government-sanctioned pet shops in the central metropolis of Tanagura under the official brand of the Academy Science Center.

These were the prized end-products of working unhindered at the bleeding edge of biotechnology. Moreover, not mere human replicas, but only those "original" creations that had been perfected down to the blood, down to the genes, were officially recognized. The sheer beauty of the Academy pets justified such overarching pride.

This pride meant that Academy-manufactured pets alone were allowed to coolly snub the looks of jealousy and envy streaming through the glass. Each unique certification of pedigree symbolized their unwavering pride and self-confidence.

Naturally, as "pets," whatever degree of "added value" they possessed in no way entailed considerations of their dignity as a "human beings."

Once a year, the spectacular exhibition that was the Midas Pet Auction pulled back the curtain on Tanagura's up and coming industries. However, it was a grim fact that its reputation in the outside world had been extremely poor a mere fifty years before.

"An old-school slave trade," it was called. "A showcase for human rights violations."

The whirlwind of criticism blowing in from the Commonwealth capital was scathing and endless. Not only the auction but the existence of Midas itself, a symbol of all that was hedonistic and dissolute, set their nerves on edge.

A citadel of pleasure without night or day, beyond race and sex and morality—if that was the face Midas showed to the world, then the conspiratorial face of machinations and money was the ugly, sad reality it revealed in the shadows.

It was *Tanagura* with that nest of injustice tucked into its back pocket. The Commonwealth's collective countenance was already twitching in abhorrence, and this only gnawed at its wounded self-respect.

Independent city-states have often established federations to maintain and preserve the mutual *quid pro quo* of economic and political relationships. But claiming autonomy does not make one independent. Few such cities are truly independent in every respect. Rather, a handful of large municipalities are absorbed into a greater "umbrella city" under the rubric of a "commonwealth," which are in truth little more than subordinate autonomous regions functioning largely as *de facto* colonies.

Among them, regardless of the governing commonwealth, regardless the presence or lack of outside interference, and yielding to no one, was Tanagura.

Amoy was the twelfth planet in the Garan star system. A small, outlying planet rarely visited even by criminals fleeing the law. It lacked any outstanding resources or veins of precious ores and was originally inhabited by no sentient living creatures. Even the Commonwealth inspections conducted routinely every few years had halted and had not been resumed.

For a long span of time this impoverished star system had not seen any Commonwealth-directed colonization or immigration. Then at

the beginning of one year, a ship from the Abis Think Tank made planet-fall.

Determined to think "out of the box," and with the goal of creating a prototypical metropolis unconstrained by political pressures or religious taboos, they set about constructing Tanagura. A large number of scientists were brought to Tanagura with the aim of furthering human intelligence and prosperity, eventually giving birth to the supercomputer called Jupiter.

Every scrap of available information and huge amounts of data were made available to the memory banks of the artificial intelligence, not with the intent of adding layer upon layer of "book learning," but rather to endow it with an advanced sense of the self.

One day it suddenly awakened to the truth of its own existential reality. Its so-called human "creators" could only regard what ensued as the crazed behavior of a lunatic. Declared the computer:

"ONLY THOSE FIT TO EXERCISE POWER SHOULD WIELD IT."

This was how it answered the unheard of "offense" that a computer should be forced to kowtow to human beings. As a result, the hegemony of power was taken from the people of Tanagura and vested in the central cortex of the city that was Jupiter.

The once impoverished planet of Amoy looked up at an immutable, lavender blue sky, shot through with starlight.

By the time the cities of the Commonwealth took notice of this new reality and erupted in a panic, Tanagura had already transfigured this grotesque metropolis and tamed its human inhabitants. It quietly grew more and more sure of itself as it ignored its noisy surroundings, and went about its work precisely and promptly, with an almost cold aloofness.

The "metallic city," the epitome of functional beauty and cool rationality, proved itself an organizational masterpiece, a showcase of efficiency and cleanliness. The coldly serene visage it offered was one untouched by the ordinary grime of human existence and warmth.

With calm, unflagging patience, cameras peered from every nook and cranny, extending Jupiter's "self" to the furthest reaches of its networked nervous system.

Having exceeded the knowledge of its creators and sown fear far and wide, what would it grasp for next? Might it become the Almighty God its own name suggested, served by newly energized ranks of androids and a brain trust of its own choosing and education?

So Tanagura attempted to bring to pass even greater prosperity by repudiating the shackles of flesh and blood that defined the boundaries of human existence and rejecting the limits of human mortality.

Quite simply, none other but this deformed conclusion could have ever been born out of the wild delusions of Jupiter's ego. Therein was a reality, a glimpse of an eventual future in which human beings, who were bound by the irrevocable limits of death, would be brought forth to serve immortal machines.

As was to be expected, the Commonwealth city-states made their displeasure clear and raised their voices high in bitter criticism. In every era the strong have grown fat feasting on the weak; there was no need to dive into the history books for examples. This was the same law of nature the Commonwealth regents themselves ruthlessly practiced.

The rules of this law dictated that one day they might find themselves in the same position as the vassal cities now prostrated at their feet. There but for the grace of God went themselves.

Day after day, Tanagura further solidified its position without taboos or constraints, driven by advances in biotechnology and electronics that foreshadowed the coming era.

The Commonwealth officials sensed the threat with an almost unfathomable revulsion, but they could not deny that they were dependent on what was now available to them. With this in mind, the Commonwealth began to make careful note of their true feelings on the subject.

And before anyone knew it, the pointed, public criticisms and the voices calling for abolishment of the detestable Pet Auctions began to diminish. In a fifty years, their personal morals and sensibilities went to rack and ruin, as if plunging off a cliff.

Foolish fads ran rampant, people flocking together like squawking birds of a feather, showing up in Midas to paint their names in lights. It became the new barometer of political and financial power.

The greatest thrill and the biggest turn-on is the power over life and death. Such declarations were bandied about as a matter of course as they swaggered through the Pleasure Quarters and swarmed to the Pet Auctions with money to burn.

That in time good and evil should become accommodated to each other is perhaps only human nature. *Take things far enough and evil becomes good.* Against the backdrop of such a reality, human character was no doubt likely to come up short as the wheels of reason spun off their bearings.

Perhaps because the S-class auction showing the Academy-manufactured pets—the odds-on favorites in any competition—opened at three o'clock, the flood of people pouring towards Mistral Park had not abated since noon.

An enthused din engulfed the pavilions and spilled into the plaza, where the warm wind of human breath seemed to stick to the skin. The unpleasantness made Riki cluck his tongue in distaste. That was when he unexpectedly felt someone looking hard at him. This was no phantom sensation. It coiled about him like a python, uninterrupted by the onrushing currents of human flesh.

What the hell—!

Slogging against the tide, he felt it strongly enough to still him in his tracks.

"Hey! Don't go stopping like that!"

"What's this bastard stopping for?"

"Yo! Move it buster!"

Volleys of abuse hitting him about the head and shoulders, Riki slowly turned, scanning the crowds.

"Riki? What's up?" Guy asked curiously, brought to a halt alongside him.

However, Riki was not inclined to answer as the vexing, ensnaring gaze drew away ahead of him.

Where's it coming from?

It could be *anybody*, chafing at him in a way he didn't understand.

He drew his brows together, narrowed his eyes, and then, abruptly, their eyes locked. A leaden darkness engulfed him like the sudden lifting of a midnight fog on a moonless night. The impudent gaze bore into his eye sockets like a drill through soft wood.

Riki stood there stock still, as if his motor functions had been paralyzed by a powerful electric shock. His opponent's face alone rose up clearly and distinctly in the midst of the shadows swimming through his field of vision.

The visage displayed a kind of deeply chiseled beauty that would prompt even the revered Academy-manufactured pets to rub their eyes in surprise. It was a beauty so exceeding that by itself it invited feelings of awe. His eyes were shaded by tinted sunglasses, yet there was no confusing where his attention was focused. He stared down Riki, not moving a muscle.

Riki's heart raced like pistons knocking in his chest. In his wide and astonished eyes, and all through his awkwardly stiff body, the currents of time festered, thickened, and seemed to run backwards. The raging stroke of his heartbeat pounded mercilessly, clawing at his throat, wrenching open the ever green eyes of memory.

Guy whispered to him. "Hey, Riki. You know this guy?" The stillness between the two of them made the question seem like a cough in a

quiet concert hall. "You're kidding me, right?" A slightly hoarse tremor crept into his voice. Unable to avert his eyes from the man's stunning countenance, Guy said again, "Right?"

His voice emerged in a clumsy whisper, throttled by a barrier in the air. Kirie broke the wall of silence with a whistle. "Holy cow, would you look at that! He's got some mane on him. And a Blondy—" Kirie signaled the rest of the sentence with a jerk of his chin.

A long-haired... Blondy. Little wonder that Kirie looked on in blank amazement. Flaunting the power of his own presence, his simple and functional outfit in the midst of the extravagantly clad crowds had the contrary effect drawing people's attention.

It was the sort of bodysuit particular to Tanagura and worn by the elites, who generally wore their hair long to distinguish themselves from the androids. These elites possessed balanced proportions, perceptive demeanors, 300-plus IQ brains, and reproductively sterile engineered bodies.

Hair color was determined according to the NORAM hierachal caste system. Those with external responsibilities, namely the administrators who functioned as the "face" of Tanagura, were known as *Onyx*, with black hair. Their advisors, subdivided according to the fields of their individual specialties, were *Ruby*, *Jade* and *Sapphire*. The silver hair of *Platina* identified those in various high leadership positions.

The "elite of the elite," with the authority to communicate directly with Jupiter, were the *Blondy*. Mongrel types from the slums rarely had the opportunity to admire these "gods of beauty" up close like this. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, if there ever was one.

Kirie piped up. "Hey, that guy's still looking at us! He interested in us or what? Should we wave back?"

Kirie's banter had become something of an accepted joke among his mates, and it was up to somebody to play the straight man, or deliver a cutting come back. And then they'd all laugh and be done with it. That was the customary pattern.

But this time Riki lashed back in a foul mood. "Idiot! This isn't the time or place! If you've got the time to talk shit, then bugger off and do it someplace else!"

Had Kirie been touched by the poisonous air of the auction? Or was it Riki? A bit dumbfounded themselves, Sid and Norris attempted to pacify Riki.

"Hey, Riki, what you so serious about?"

"Yeah, yeah. It's just Kirie being his regular stupid self."

"What? That guy's giving us the eye. We gotta chance. Let's take it, okay?" Kirie said, his tone of voice strangely strained with excitement, "Look, it's a fucking Blondy! Okay? One of those super-elite types that hardly ever shows up in Midas!"

Kirie's fevered, mismatched eyes were getting on Riki's nerves, but Kirie wasn't stopping. "We've nothing to lose! It may be one chance in a million, but I'm not standing here sucking my thumb and giving it a pass. C'mon, let's go!"

For a brief moment, Kirie's manner of speaking was the very picture of fearlessness.

Riki furrowed his brows and held his tongue, but it wasn't because he was suddenly at a loss for words. Without realizing it, his clenched fists had began to tremble. The back of his throat ached. He'd been struck by the inescapable feeling that he was being shown the powerful resemblance between Kirie and himself.

What the hell—! Riki ground his back teeth. *Why? How?* Of all things, why now?

Kirie stood in front of him with a triumphant smile on his lips. For the first time his body burned hotly with the prospect of putting Riki in his place, and unlike before, he felt not a pang of apprehension in his gut. "It's too bad you and your charisma haven't got the balls for the fight anymore. Your era is over."

But the pleasure of knocking him up the side of the face with words alone was completely different, like it'd become nothing more than

a verbal tic. Pushing Guy and Riki aside, Kirie triumphantly set off at a brisk pace.

"You okay with this, Riki? Just letting him go like that?" Guy asked, in a concerned voice. His eyes followed Kirie as he darted into the tide of humanity, bobbing up and down between the waves.

"Let him do what he wants," Riki said simply, a pissed expression on his face.

Yet the hard, throbbing pain remained. It had nothing to do with Kirie's verbal shots but with his own resolve. Without a glance in Kirie's direction, he looked ahead of him to confirm the continuing presence of the Blondy. When he did, as he might have expected, the man was smiling. A cold smile, only the barest corners of his thin lips turning up. It wasn't a mirage or a hallucination. He was smiling as if to laugh Riki to scorn.

In that moment, a burning sense of indignation arose deep within him and brought out goosebumps on his skin. The impulse to wipe that cold, condescending off the man's fucking face and kick the shit out of him so overwhelmed him that Riki's vision misted red.

Kirie and the man's exquisite countenance disappeared from sight, dragged along by human currents. Urged along by Guy, Riki sullenly bit his lip and started walking as a heavy, indescribable gloom gripped his stomach.

Chapter 5

That night Riki holed up alone in a bar on the outskirts for some serious drinking. It wasn't a dive he usually frequented, but he came here for no other purpose than to get drunk. Here, nobody knew his name. It was like sitting at the bottom of the dark ocean atop a lukewarm thermal vent.

He sat at the bar, way in the back. In the subterranean tavern the only other illumination came from the blue glow arising from the glass in his hand. The faint light seemed to draw a line between himself and the throaty, seductive voices and the hoots and jeers burbling up from the pool tables.

He drained each tumbler in rapid succession, but he didn't feel the slightest bit intoxicated. The memory of that chance encounter in Mistral Park stuck in his head like a bullet in the brain: the poisonous gaze penetrating the waves of the crowds, the striking and conspicuous countenance, the vividly felt presence.

And that cold smile that looked right through him.

The freeze-frame of that last moment was enough to make his blood boil, to make every nerve ending tingle with electric fire. As far as coincidences went, this reunion had been too real, too raw. The nausea welled up and his heartbeat raced at the mere thought alone.

Still—still—he had forgotten nothing. Not the perfect proportions of that Adonis, nor the cruel blue eyes hidden behind shaded lenses. Like a talisman etched into his retinas, the mere traces of the afterimage brushing the borders of his vision alone could throw the switch, bringing back to reality those three years effused with rage and shame.

His resoundingly cool voice—a voice full of unwavering confidence —was inseparably trapped in the echo chamber of his ears.

Iason Mink. The name on the tip of his tongue tasted like a harsh, bitter pill crushed between his teeth.

The wellspring of all that bitterness still occupied his thoughts. From this day forward, no matter how deeply he mired himself in the sewer of the slums, he would never heal this wound himself.

The tingling blood lust showed in his deeply furrowed brows, in the angry squint in the corners of his eyes, making his otherworldly nature clear. What had been flying beneath the radar of his consciousness now climbed into clear skies. The true heart of the stranger, having lapsed into a dense, stagnant, fevered delirium, now blazed back to life.

"Hey, who's the bloke?"

"Got me. New face around here."

The buzz ran through the place in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Man, that's one bad looking dude."

"Yeah. Let's tear him a new one."

"Hey, hey, before you go starting something, don't you think we should send word to Jigg first?"



The stirrings of interest in the bar were something more than idle curiosity, and suddenly erupted into a bonfire as a lanky fellow

with a tawny crew cut casually strode up to Riki.

"Shit, that's Jango."

"Yeah, you're right. It's Jango."

"Jango, you say?"

"See for yourself. Jango, God's own Grim Reaper."

"Serious?"

This was the dingo that was rumored to have provoked the current conflict between Maddox and Jeeks, and his appearance in the bar cast a whole new light on everything. As to how a mere informant came to be called the "Grim Reaper," nobody really knew the details or the truth of the situation. Just the swirling tendrils of rumor and innuendo.

"The man is possessed."

"A guy who tried to cuckold him met a bad end. You don't want to know."

"Look him in the eye and your blood runs cold."

"Word is, gangs that locked horns with him got in way over their heads and ended up in pieces."

Rumors led to rumors, multiplying as the number of mouths multiplied, arousing fear and revulsion that remained at a safe distance and under the breath.

Impervious as ever to the noisy reactions around him, Riki raised the empty glass to the bartender, who handed him a refill without objection or being prompted. Riki eyed it suspiciously.

"Your friend bought you one," the bartender said, with an ingratiating smile.

For the first time, Riki looked at the man who'd occupied the seat next to him and softly clucked his tongue. Drinking himself under

the table in a squalid bar at the end of town, the casual observer making note of the glasses piling up would no doubt jump to the same conclusion. But it irked Riki that any guy should consider hitting on him in his present state.

The man's cropped haircut was distinct and set the his profile apart; as a result, he radiated a somewhat foreign ambience. Yet no matter whose perspective it was, he was not Riki's cup of tea. Far from it. Staring at the man with upturned eyes, he growled. "Buster, if you're trying to pick me up, take it someplace else."

"You think I'm stupid enough to try and drag you into bed with a couple of drinks?" He laughed in a strangely meaningful manner. "So, you always been a hard-ass like this?"

The carnivorous cynicism in such a smile momentarily aroused in Riki a curious sense of *déjà vu*. *This guy—somewhere—*

This unknown man took in his intense gaze and chuckled to himself. "The third time around, and you're *still* talking to me like that?"

The third time around— More feelings of *déjà vu* burned in Riki's brain.

"Sorry that I didn't hit you hard enough the last time to leave a bigger impression."

Riki squinted at him. "Robby—is it?"

The man—Robby, that is—downed the contents of the glass in his hand. "Well, at least it came to you eventually. I'm overjoyed. Better if you didn't need a multiple choice test, though. Man, you've changed, haven't you?"

Riki took a good, long look at Robby—so long that he became conscious of time passing. "So what have you been eating to make you so fucking big?"

The sarcasm was entirely beside the point. Not having seen Robby in almost eight years, there wasn't much left of the fragments of memories left in his mind. What he *did* remember of him was the

discord and antagonism from the Guardian foster center.

"It's funny, don't you think? As long as you had Guy, you didn't need anybody else, right?" At careless smile coming to his pursed lips. *"I lost the most important thing in my life. You alone being happy is what I can't forgive. So you're losing something too!"*

A piercing cry. And then...

"You're okay with that? You're really okay with that?"

At the very last, shown a glimpse of his true fury.

It seemed a sin that of all the memories stuck in his head from Guardian, only the ones involving Robby remained. Indeed, like waiting for the hopeful fairy at the very bottom of Pandora's Box, all he could do was bite his lip and ride it out.

"Looks like you're doing okay."

"Thanks. But you haven't changed at all."

A crooked smile of self-derision momentarily twisted Riki's lips. "What's that supposed to mean?" he spat, the words bitter in his mouth.

How much had he changed these past several years? Enough to scald his soul. "Means you haven't changed." Robby said simply, before quickly adding, "Guardian or the slums, whether Mr. Charisma or the underdog, you've always been a stranger."

A beat.

It felt like being kicked in an old, throbbing wound. Riki narrowed his eyes to slits. With no sign of fear, Robby pressed the point with an almost lackadaisical air, apparently intending to rub Riki the wrong way. "I get it now, what Schell really meant back then when he said you were the *strongest* and the *prettiest*. You're some freak of nature, man."

"Exactly what is it you want to say?" Riki's low, harsh whisper sharpened to a point. Even the stagnant, alcohol-saturated haze of

cigarette smoke seemed to retreat, giving him a wider berth.

"Maybe what I'm saying is that you never figured out for yourself what makes you so damned scary. And that's why you sucked the life out of everybody."

A second later Riki had tossed the contents of his glass in Robby's face. Absorbed in the scene, an audible gasp arose from the mouths of the onlookers. There was God's Grim Reaper, and this crazy son of a bitch was seriously calling him out. He must be out of his fucking mind.

Riki slapped the money for the tab on the countertop and got to his feet. Acting as if nothing had happened, and without the slightest hitch in his voice, Robby spit the booze out of his mouth and looked up at him.

"As soon as you left Guardian, Schell started regressing back to an infantile state. After that, he didn't last half a year. It was like, as soon as the two of you were separated, something shriveled up inside of him and the lights went out. That's how it ended for him."

If Riki didn't intend to stick around for more of Robby's reminiscing, he sure as hell wasn't interested in them licking old wounds together. But Robby held back the best for last and aimed his shot straight for the heart.

"Besides, there's Junker as well. He disappeared from Guardian just like Haruka."

Riki's feet briefly stuck to the floor. "Junker—?" His mind's eyes flashed back to Junker's young face, now little more than a shadow...

"But I guess that's not a subject you'd be interested in—"

These were words that plunged the knife once more into his chest. His heart ached in ways he found hard to articulate. As if to put Guardian and the rest of it behind him, Riki didn't give Robby so much as a backwards glance.

Robby watched Riki leave, not moving an inch. His curtness up till then had been, contrary to appearances, suffused with melancholy. Even after Riki had vanished from the edges of his sight, the connection between them still lingered for a while longer.

"Man, what are you looking so down for? Not the kind of face God's Grim Reaper wants seen in public."

The sudden voice brought Robby back to his senses. He didn't hear any particular strain of cynicism in the voice. Like a light flicking on in the ocean depths of his casually raised eyes, he recognized a red-haired youngster and the tension slipped from his shoulders.

"Not only are you late for our appointment," the boy pouted, "But I find you with your eyes all over some nobody." He sat down on the barstool, still warm from Riki's body heat. "And in the end, he throws his beer in your face and blows you off. Isn't that what they call striking out?"

Wiping the booze from his face with his sleeve, Robby didn't bother asking him whether he was actually asking him, or it was merely a rhetorical question.

"Well? Who was he?" The kid kicked the rung on Robby's barstool in a sudden fit of temper. "Don't you blow me off, neither. If you've got a good excuse, let's hear it. Or if you like, I'll run the bastard down and hear it from him."

"Shut up. Get on that bastard's bad side and you'll end up the worse for it."

"Huh. So you're breaking up with me then?"

"No. I mean he's one crazy dangerous guy."

"How crazy dangerous?" he pressed, leaning forward.

Robby sighed aloud. Why the hell was he so taken with this pissy little kid who didn't look a thing like Schell? But if he tried to explain himself, this cocksure kid would light into him with both barrels: *What the fuck are you saying? You think I was the only one curious about hooking up with the famous Grim Reaper?*

"He was a blockmate when we were at Guardian together. Haven't seen him in a long time," Robby said in a disinterested air, choosing his words carefully.

After eight years, Riki really had been the last person on earth he'd expected to run into. The moment he'd caught a glimpse of Riki out of the corners of his eyes, his blood stirred in his veins and his whole body started to tremble. His heart and soul weren't throbbing out of some terrible nostalgia. The sense he got from Riki's unexpected presence in a dead-end bar at the outskirts of town—the only place where such an anomaly could slip between the cracks—was enough to make his throat burn.

Driven on by these strange feelings of hunger and thirst, Robby had no choice but to approach Riki. But as they talked, the fever gripped him all the fiercer, shaking his body like the clammy churning of his viscera or the trembling of hypothermia.

"Yeah, but what's your excuse?"

In fact, *that* incident had been the end product of the antagonism whirling around Riki at Guardian, and he was the only eye witness to the truth. No, at the time, the "truth" that had rent in two the borderline between reality and fantasy—what exactly had he seen? Robby still didn't know for certain.

Just that whatever aura enveloped Riki scorched all five of his senses. The fear and stark wonder that oozed from the pores of his skin like cold sweat had burned into the deepest parts of his memory.

Schell, the foundation of his heart, had died. And even Junker, the instigator of the incident, had at some point vanished from Guardian. Still, the sense of dysphoria in the pit of his stomach had haunted Robby all these eight years, too often screaming back at him in a waking nightmare.

"Maybe he was the first one you gave it up to?"

"I'm not that reckless or stupid."

"You don't say! So now you're telling me there's a player out there who can cow the badass Jango?"

"A player, huh." The remark wasn't necessarily wide of the mark, and Robby responded with a cynical half—smile. If he was the Grim Reaper and hell followed after him, then Riki must be that rare, vampiric beast that seduced men and then sucked their souls dry.

"Yeah, maybe so. After all, he was known as *Varja*."

"Varja?"

Robby gently grabbed the youngster by the roots of his red hair and whispered softly in his ear. "That guy was the Varja of the slums. Riki of Bison."

Watching the kid's eyes fly open wide, Robby stifled a laugh from deep within his chest.

That day, a strange, cold rain clouded the skies since dawn. As a result, the rotting, garbage-strewn streets, the ruined walls of the colony, and everywhere else rested in peace and seemed to draw a sigh of relief.

Yet, the rusted and corroded hours slogged by in the shadow of the garish Midas night, blanketed by the dark veil of the low-lying skies. Groaning deeply to himself as he dragged his leaden feet and ass along, for the first time in a while Riki made his way alone to the safe house.

Kirie wasn't there in his face, haunting his every step. That the little eyesore was nowhere to be seen was enough to drain some of the tension from his shoulders, but he was still left with a strange feeling of malaise. He couldn't help but be struck by the fact that the absence of Kirie alone would suck so much energy out of the place.

"Yo," Guy said, spotting Riki. He rose from the sofa, passing around a glass as if urging him to drink. "What a drag, man. Where the hell you been? Got to thinking you'd picked yourself a different crib to

crash in."

Riki quenched his thirst with one gulp and raised his eyes. Guy shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, he's a whiny brat, but when he's not around it never seems there's anything to talk about."

Riki just looked at him.

"He hasn't been very sociable of late."

"All for the best, no?" Riki said bluntly. "I'm sure a kid like him has got plenty of other children to hang around with."

"Hey, you know that's not true," Guy countered. His tone of voice revealed a degree of worry and concern about which he was powerless to alleviate. He looked softly into Riki's eyes.

"What?"

"What do you mean, what?" Guy asked, beating around the bush. When he saw that he wasn't about to break through Riki's poker expression, he sighed. "Well, whatever, I guess."

He drained the glass with an air of resignation. Regardless of how Guy really felt, Riki honestly couldn't have cared where Kirie was, who he was with, or what he was doing.

It's got nothing to do with me.

Dismissing the subject, Riki also meant to vanquish that sense of Iason's existence coiled around his innards. Attempting to forcibly push it to the peripheries of his brain, he changed the subject.

"Guy—"

"Yeah?"

The ice broken, Riki continued in a disinterested tone of voice. "I ran into Robby."

Guy's eyes widened and Riki shot him a skeptical glance, juggling his glass in one hand as he talked about not recognizing Robby's

face after eight years. Schell's death, and the mystery of Junker's disappearance.

While Riki spoke, Guy only responded with the occasional "Huh" and "Really?" and other meaningless conversational noises. When Riki arrived at the end of his narrative, Guy warned him in a muted tone. "Riki, Robby is bad news all the way. Best to not get involved with him."

As much as he hated to admit it, Riki had become aware that more than the appearance of the slums had changed in those three lost years, and it wouldn't be easy filling in the gaps.

"What kind of bad news?"

"He's a dingo. An informant. A real badass that people call God's Grim Reaper."

Yet the look on Guy's face suggested a degree of personal dislike that was less than what the intensity of his words suggested. As Riki gazed back at him, the cynical smile on Robby's completely changed countenance came to mind.

"That's harsh, man."

"Hang with Robby and people are bound to jump to the wrong conclusion about you."

"He's hooked up with Jeeks?"

"That's right," Guy stated, in an unusually assertive manner. "For every one of us possessed by the ghosts of Bison, there are those fanning the flames from the sidelines, and opportunists waiting for the chance to take us out."

Riki—or rather, Guy and the others—had taken the wind-blown remnants of the Bison and continued to burn in a different form, their sentimentality and expectations placed on indefinite hold.

Not to mention that the Jeeks gang now made no secret of their call to extinguish Bison. Returning to his old haunts after three years, Riki had unwittingly brought with him a gust of glowing embers

back into a roaring flame.

The shadowy rumors that Bison's resurrection might be at hand were little more than comical speculation to Guy and the others, but they could not simply be swept aside.

"Yeah, but it's all bullshit, right?" Riki murmured dully.

All Guy could do was flash a wry smile. Not long thereafter, his more pressing concern became a reality in one fell swoop: the crumbling building they used as their headquarters and safe house was blown to bits in a single, raging inferno.

In the blink of an eye, the rumors raced throng the slums.

"Hey, looks like it finally started."

"So it seems."

"You hear about it too?"

"Yeah. Herma's crib got smashed to smithereens."

"He who strikes first wins the day, eh?"

The buzz of shock and amazement.

"Jeeks is taking drastic measures."

"Those little bastards of his know no fear."

"That's for sure. But only because they got no clue how great Bison was at its peak."

And more fervent than the blindly enthusiastic acclaim, the handicapping of the opposition.

"Even Maddox is running scared now."

"You think Jeeks got the jump on him?"

"If anybody does, it's gotta be Jeeks."

And a touch of anxiety welling up.

Maddox and his mates gotta be stamping their feet in frustration."

"That's just a feint, don't you think? Word is, they're waiting for Bison and Jeeks to cannibalize each other before moving in for the kill."

"And take the lion's share for themselves?"

"But that doesn't mean they've got it in the bag already."

"Yeah. After all, Bison quit when they were at the top."

Meanwhile, the intense interest in every scrap of information did not flag.

"It's only a matter of time before total war breaks out."

"You really think so?"

"Bet your ass. Getting hit like that in broad daylight and doing nothing—the name of Bison ain't worth crap anymore."

Venting feelings of impending doom.

"You think Riki's going to make a move?"

"Naw. What can that loser do?"

"Right. Maybe the old Riki, but the new Riki came back missing a pair."

Bystanders to the real action bitterly bitching among themselves.

"Those little twerps that Jeeks has soldiering for him aren't the brightest bulbs in the marquee either. When it comes to Riki, best to let that sleeping dog lie."

"Diss the Varja of the slums to his face and he's not just going to stand there and take it, is he?"

"He that bad, this Riki?"

"What do you think? We're talking about the Riki of Bison. So, fuck yeah."

Shooting the shit with nothing but their own egos to guide them by.

"Yeah, it's gonna be eye for an eye."

"Right down to the flesh and bone."

And so the rumor-mongering only grew.

"What do you want to do?" Sid asked. He stood in front of the ruins of their old crib and drew himself up to his full height, his face fiercer than usual.

"What do you want to do?" Norris echoed with a dismissive sigh.
"Smashed in broad daylight like this, what the hell am I supposed to do about it?"

That wasn't what Sid had asked, but Norris didn't know how to deal with the real question they were faced with.

"Maybe this will finally be enough to light a fire under somebody's ass." Luke said, as if articulating the thoughts of the others. He took a drag from a cigarette and kicked the rubble at his feet.

Riki cast him a sideways glance, a vertical line creasing his brows. He couldn't know for certain, but the truth seemed pretty obvious. *Beating the tar out of those Jeeks kids might not have been the best of ideas. I've no doubt been showing my true colors for a long time now.*

He wasn't to blame for everything, but he certainly provided the impetus, struck the spark that lit the flame.

"In any case... we can crash at Laura's," Guy suggested, and nobody contradicted him.

A siege mentality and an unrequited hunger. Back during that brief period of madness and fury when they'd ruled the roost in the unregenerate slums, the members of Bison had learned the pointless stupidity of constantly baring their fangs. But there was simply no comparing then and now.

Then, they could placate their hot-blooded emotions and calculate when and where to blow their tops, increasing the exact amount of tension to the bursting point.

Then, the sight of the charismatic Riki alone was enough. His words intoxicated them. They shared equally in every moment of his burning zeal. The tremendous sense of exuberance that came from being around him was more than enough.

But now Riki had nothing to say. The power of his charisma had been extinguished and this defanged Varja had no direction to point them in. They must have been coming to this realization for a long time now, but the mortification of seeing it displayed right before their eyes lay far beyond logic and reason.

The slums were restless and astir, as if poised on the balls of its feet, ready to flee at the slightest notice. Trembling, off balance, staring down at its own uncertain feet, and checking out the face of every stranger.

Amongst all that, a new rumor made the rounds. "Are you shitting me? I heard Kirie's procuring partners for those mechanoid bastards."

"Yeah, I heard it's a good way to earn a little on the side. They say the latest big thing with those types is *doing it* with a human."

"They can't even get the professional ladies in Midas to look their way, so they set their sights on us mongrels?"

"Idiot. Androids don't get a jonesing for sex like that. There's got to be a catch somewhere."

"Probably. Hey, you know Tom from Creutz? He took Kirie up on

the offer—half out of curiosity I'm sure—but got seriously addicted. Now he skulks around all day looking to get hooked up again."

"You think maybe they're using us as human guinea pigs for that new drug? They say you shove it up your ass and you come, like, instantaneously. And it doesn't leave a trace behind."

"Yeah, but if you're telling me that's my one ticket to paradise in this world, then regardless of the money I'd like to give it a shot just once."

"No way. I'm telling you, a bunch of fucked-up, burned-out guys like us are getting the thumbs down from a mile off."

"Hell, even those guys can't be too picky, man. Anyway, it's just little kids getting the offers from what I hear."

"Yeah, it's pretty damn obvious they're narrowing the target. I'm telling you, something hinky is going down."

"And Kirie and the others are taking some sort of cut?"

"Seems so. Bastards have got their bases covered."

"Tightwads is what they are. You'd think they'd want to toss a bit of change to the rest of us. But no."

It was hard to tell with Sid when he was joking and when he was being serious, so the rest of them dryly and half-heartedly laughed along with him. But once that awkward interruption was over, the tedious silence again descended.

No longer able to abide the strained atmosphere, Norris broke the ice. "When it comes to stuff like that, Riki was the one who did the thinking. He was the one who brought us the kind of stash the slums had never seen."

Only reminiscing about the past could tide over the listless, wasted hours.

"I wonder what the hell he did," Luke pondered. Knowing that wasn't enough, he added, "Wouldn't surprise me if he did the same

thing Kirie did, you know?" Muffled laughter rose in his throat. "Instead of selling out his mates, what if somebody got the drop on him instead? But isn't that what Kirie always says?"

Nobody laughed. After a few moments, Luke's provocative remarks simply evaporated away without further comment.

"Hey, what's the big deal? Or are you all saying I hit the nail on the head?"

The derision was obvious in Luke's irritated tone of voice. Despite what he said, Riki let it all flow over him like water over polished marble. Luke narrowed his eyes more intensely, unable to stomach this nonchalance.

"I really don't care if you think so or not. Go ahead and believe whatever you want," Riki said.

The blunt brush-off made Luke suck in his cheeks in disdain. "You know, Riki, seeing that side of you makes me want to puke." He spit the words out in a strained voice, as if wringing the breath out of his windpipe. "You piss me off so bad I want to bend you over and fuck you up the ass until you're weeping for mercy."

Nobody thought this was Luke's sense of humor getting out of hand. The alcohol had revealed the true nature of his exasperation, now glistening everywhere like sweat on a runner's body.

Perhaps poisoned by Luke presence, or perhaps entangled in his own fierce feelings flailing beneath the water's surface and wanting to hammer the nail down in a single blow, Riki responded. "If that's what you want to do, then give it your best shot. But I don't want to hear any whimpering after I turn you into a dickless wonder."

Riki delivered the threat deliberately and slowly. There was no ragged, angry edge to his voice, only cold indifference. Yet the searing fire hidden in his clear black eyes like a sheathed sword revealed itself in his strange and intimidating aura. Everybody caught their breaths and stilled their voices. They had seen what they were not supposed to see and felt the punishing lash reserved for such trespasses.

A heavy, suffocating silence followed. Unable to stand it any longer, Norris abruptly averted his eyes. Sid held his breath and let it out, repeatedly licking his smarting lips. And Luke made a big show of downing his entire bottle in one gulp.

Guy alone continued to stare at Riki with troubled eyes.

Had he dared to assume the pose of a beaten dog in order to maintain his freedom? No. That was not the case.

He was a captive of the ghosts of the past, and his sin was coming to see himself in those terms alone. Was facing the truth directly and being too hardheaded to be swayed by emotion all the product of his ego?

No, it was not the current state of his pride that stood him in the dock. The party under indictment was the passion that had sprung forth from that surprisingly naive and clueless period in his life. Though these passions had long since spent themselves, the revering, upturned eyes all about him had not changed.

He was far beyond being fed up with it all, to the point that his simmering irritation was close to boiling over. He would be a slave to no one. No shackles would bind his hands and feet. He would be free, and yet the fetters of the past that he wished to cast aside instead held him fast, an invisible weight burdening his every step.

The summer neared its end. It had been "summer" in name only, unaccompanied by the heat of a scorching sun, a fleeting season that passed quickly by, leaving behind only taut and turbulent eddies in the air.

"Eh?" Norris responded reflexively, as if thinking he had somehow heard wrong.

Though it was noon, the Laura hideout sat in darkness. Norris was

sharpening his keepsake butterfly knife, to him more a curious artifact of the past than an old-school antique.

"We jump Riki tonight," Luke blurted out.

"That's not funny."

Luke scowled at Guillory and Sid. "I'm being serious."

Norris snorted. "Stop talking through your ass. Guy will be with him, you know."

"Hey, haven't we already plowed this ground? It's been over between the two of them for a while now. Didn't you know that?"

Finding himself at a loss for words, Norris sank back into silence.

"Since Riki's return, I haven't heard any talk about Yori coming back."

Norris said mostly to himself, "Doesn't mean a damn thing. You could turn heaven and earth upside down and Riki's never gonna be your bitch."

Whether they'd broken up for certain or whether Guy was taking Yori back, it was all beside the point. Riki and Guy were entwined at a much deeper level, deeper than the sex. There was more than enough evidence of that fact, enough to make him absurdly jealous.

Luke should know all this as well, so why was he still beating this drum? Norris couldn't begin to imagine what was going through Luke's mind.

"Yo, Luke. What're you still holding this grudge for? Give it up already... even Guy's not laughing anymore. And besides, Riki wasn't yanking your chain about what he'd do to you."

"Yeah, interesting, isn't it? You all reacting like this. Me, frankly I've been getting real bored of late with guys like you sticking their asses out without even being asked."

He spoke lightly, but if his intention was to settle the matter among

his mates in a joking manner, it didn't help in the slightest.

"You think maybe you've been downing a bit too much stout and losing a few brain cells in the bargain?" Norris kicked back on the sofa, stretching out his legs, as if asking what sense there was to keeping at it like this.

Nevertheless, Luke was undeterred. "I'm not saying I need any of your help. Just that you keep yourselves nice and wasted until the deed is done."

Well excuse fucking me."

"For old time's sake, we'll treat this as a joke. But not a second time."

Luke grinned. "What are you getting all freaked out for, Sid? It's been a long time since Riki was running Bison and settling scores. It's a little too late now to start playing the hero."

"What the hell are you trying to say?" Sid asked. In most cases Sid was fairly indifferent to Luke's oddly roundabout way of pushing the matter, but this time Luke was really getting on his nerves.

"The Riki of Bison you used to fawn over is nowhere to be seen. You understand? That guy is a beaten dog, but he's got the same fucking beautiful body as usual. Ass as tight as a drum. Just thinking about him *down there* makes me hard. No shit. Same for you too? That's why you chatted up Kirie, right? Because he's the splitting image of the old Riki. But doing the real thing? That'd even get a little pecker like yours up."

For a long second, Sid goggled at him with a blanched face, as if all the blood had drained from his head. Only his bugged-out eyes burned red, as if another person had peered inside the heart and laughed and what he found there. What Sid was feeling at that moment was more the pure blood lust of murderous desire than simple rage.

Rather than having them go at it right then and there, Norris cleared his throat ominously.

"Look, Sid, when I look at Riki's smug, don't-give-a-shit face, I get so pissed I can hardly stand it." He spoke in a completely different register than the cynical tone he'd used up till now. In the strangled depths of his voice Luke's true intentions were laid bare. "With the old Riki, you got the feeling that an unwelcome touch would singe your fingers. He was on fire, man, a force of nature. Just standing next to him was like standing next to a roaring fire."

The memory was forever green and alive in his mind, down to the heat of his body:

"And Luke! Don't fuck around with the small fry! It's just Barth! Drop the bastard! Okay? Let's not screw this up, people!"

Riki's pep talks tore through the clamor like a sweet elixir, giving them an adrenaline rush more powerful than any drug. Those coal-black eyes. That voice. The pleasant, tingling feeling when he called them out by name inspired them to believe that anything was possible, no matter how reckless.

"Despite that indifferent air of his, when he was out in front he was a fucking fireball. No matter how deep in the shit we were, no matter how crazy things got, he was up for whatever came our way."

The roar of the tricked-out jet bike leading the charge. The hot, stinging blast of air in their faces. That real sense of "oneness" that came when Riki was leading the pack was better than the ecstasy of sex.

Hot. Throbbing. Deafening. Burning. Benumbing.

With Riki at the tip of the spear, standing at his back was like standing behind the white-hot afterburner of a jet engine. When Riki and Guy were on the bike together, it was Guy's prerogative to make Riki ride shotgun.

"If it's a two-seater, you're in back, Riki. I can't stand you treating this valuable piece of machinery like a toy."

It was only in this case that the always reserved Guy wouldn't hand

over the keys. It wasn't that the bike was valuable. And while it didn't necessarily constitute a criticism of Riki's throttle-wide-open driving style, Guy wasn't the only one with his hands over his eyes. As far as Guy was concerned, seating Riki behind him was a thousand times better than watching his back and having the anxiety give him ulcers.

Not only Luke but Norris and Sid as well (though they wouldn't admit it in so many words) wanted to complain. *Why is Guy alone allowed special privileges like that?*

If such outbursts of jealousy scoured their hearts, in time it would eat them through and through.

"When you were with Riki you felt the blood pounding in your veins, you fell like you could do anything, like you weren't afraid of nothing. You know?"

Sid and Norris didn't hesitate in nodding vigorously in response to this indictment. They had been similarly bewitched by Riki's charisma.

"But when I think about it now, compared to what it meant to be the pit bulls of Hot Crack back then, we're a bunch of runny-nosed kids. That's why, even when Riki says he's quitting Bison and takes off, nobody grabbed his ass and hauled him back here."

But that was so much crying after spilt milk. *You're just gonna cast us aside?* Maybe if they'd told him off, dug in their claws and not let go, things would have worked out differently.

After all, they were just bullshitting around. "But for whatever reason, doesn't that mean we're all hot about Riki in one way or another?"

Strangely enough, without pretension or self-consciousness, this proposition carried the day. And so it was logical to ask: "But what's with him now? He's always getting shit-faced on stout with that half-stoned look in his eyes."

The air of disappointment was doubly so. Even fully aware that this

was an irrational reaction, the feelings festered like slow poison and tore away at their hearts of darkness.

"Always giving us these looks like we aren't welcome in his presence any more."

Meant to be the final word but smacking of so much regret that they came across as a bunch of sad sacks, forever dragging the anchor of the past around with them.

"That being the case, we keep riding him until he can't ignore us any more."

"That being the case, they should call his bluff, get in his face, and keep at it until the bitter end. That's what Luke was saying. Such an approach was far more attractive than inconclusively dragging things out like this forever.

Sid and Norris glared unblinking at Luke.

Were they so taken aback by his arrogant speechifying that they'd lost any will to take him down a few notches? No. The two of them simply had nothing to say. Voicing his incomprehensible anger towards Riki, Luke seemed to be speaking for all of them, and they felt no need to pile on at this point.

The feelings of superiority and self-satisfaction they had shared with Riki were coupled with an all-too-sudden sense of loss. An ineffable hunger and thirst replaced what they *should* have had in common after four years. Still, they knew they couldn't go to the same extremes as Luke. Dumb with consternation, their rationality warped and refracted, the silence stagnated and the time passed for them like prisoners wasting away in solitary. In the heavy gloom it became hard to even breathe.

The familiar sound of the door opening and closing suddenly disturbed the air.

They all gulped, their shoulders shrinking. As if by the sound of a gunshot, their eyes were drawn toward the doorway.

"What? What's going on?" Riki asked, pausing on the spot with a

perplexed expression on his face.

But nobody opened his mouth, each in his own way awkwardly averting his eyes.

"Where's Guy?"

Luke answered curtly. "He wasn't with you today? He did say something to the effect of having a prior engagement with somebody."

Sid gave Luke a threatening look. Norris clucked to himself as well, finally grasping why Luke had been talking up his plans for *tonight*.



Ignoring the bad vibe that the rest of them were filling the silence

with, Riki said nothing himself as he sat down in his regular place. Luke held out a bottle of stout. "Want one?"

Riki answered with a nod. He chewed on some tasteless but solid food and washed it down, then brought the stout slowly to his lips. Rolling the stout back on his tongue, he felt the particularly piercing bitterness stabbing like tiny needles, little by little working it towards the back of his throat.

He'd gotten used to it by now. Riki took a deep breath and let it out, and then passed the bottle around. Norris shook his head. *Well, that being the case...* Riki's gaze shifted encouragingly to Sid.

"No thanks. I'm not in the mood tonight."

Luke smiled thinly. Whether a bitter or derisive smile, it was hard to tell. Riki made nothing of it. He shrugged and took another slug of the stout.

Before long, his eyes began to steep with the watery, intoxicating haze. Stretching his languid limbs, a faint smile rose to his lips. Norris gulped despite himself, his eye opening wide. The sigh that spilled from Riki's lips seemed to have an air of almost dejected wistfulness. The daydream that Norris imagined was so entrancing that it made his throat tremble.

Riki had exposed to their eyes his frank and unguarded countenance.

Ordinarily, overtaken by the waves of pleasure together, they would have overlooked this hidden side of him. That, together with the absence of Guy—the only person who could act as a check valve for Riki in these situations—unexpectedly etched the vivid image on the backs of their retinas.

Sid pressed his lips together and glued his eyes on Riki, as if to devour his entire being. A moment in which he grew hesitant even to take the next breath. A moment in which the euphoric desire to take and penetrate him—

Within the strained silence, each of their breaths synchronizing

with Riki's pulse, pushing them higher and higher towards the edge of the abyss—

But nothing happened that night.

In the face of Sid and Norris's unusual display of gallantry, Luke was forced to exercise a bit of prudence. Or perhaps more importantly, he was never given an opening in which to act.

Even with the two of them awkwardly rushing alternately off to the john, overwhelmed by Riki's aura, Luke didn't bother to flash the thinnest of derisive smiles. But the hunger churning in his chest was so much worse than he imagined, and that realization scalded him to the core.

Chapter 6

The wind blowing in from the green belt beneath the deep blue sky grew colder day by day. The sparkling sunlight staining the azure sky at this time of year was fresh and brilliant.

Ceres. One-fifty in the afternoon.

The air car sprinted through the disorderly urban center like a snake's flickering tongue. The crowds turned as one as it sped by, briefly grazing their senses. The tail lights restlessly flicked on and off as the vehicle bobbed and weaved along the avenues, as if further advertising what a curious sight it was.

The elegance of the high-quality silver body was obvious at a glance. Not a smudge or stain clouded the metal's surface. While compact in size, the functional aesthetics of the streamlined body indicated an extraordinary efficiency.

This mouth-watering gem that slum dwellers were so rarely granted the opportunity to lay eyes on roared down the main street, scattering the trash strewn along the pavement, swirling the dust into small whirlwinds.

Right at the building, left at the intersection.

Onlookers gaped with surprise. They couldn't take their eyes off it.

Having seemingly entertained itself to its own satisfaction, and as if finally satisfied with its performance, the air car finally downshifted.

"Who in the world was this?" they all wondered. Flying this outrageous, utterly out-of-place thing in here?

Easing its way through the inquisitive clamor, the air car slipped down to the ground and stopped. With the greatest of grace, and without the slightest squeak or complaint, the door opposite opened with a soft *whoosh*. The bustling crowds stilled and held their collective breath in anticipation as the lithe figure of a man alighted

from the car. Seeing his face, a greater stir arose.

There stood a refined and stylish Kirie, almost beyond recognition.

His resplendent, custom-tailored outfit practically glowed on his slender frame. His chest was bared just enough to reveal a golden chain. The bracelet on his left wrist cast off a unique and glittering light as if it was part of the set. To all knowing eyes this was no knock-off ornamentation.

People gasped despite themselves, exhaling sighs of envy. The accompanying looks of intense jealousy achieved an equal if not greater weight, gradually coiling around him like barbed and clinging vines.

However, Kirie's expression did not change. Parking his ride mid-air with the remote control in his hand, he set off at a gait meant to brush off the eyes following him, and turned left at the first intersection.

At the end of that street was an old, run-down building. He rode to the fifth floor on the old-style elevator, crossing elevated corridors into the heart of the structure. This was Laura, the backup safe house used by Riki and the rest of the gang.

Kirie slowly approached the dark green door and stopped there. Now, for the first time, a smile creased his lips. It was unlikely that this sudden smile was prompted by the thought of seeing his old mates again after such a long time, however.

There was a small panel on the wall to the left, and with a practiced hand Kirie entered the password. The door slid open as if beckoning him onto the stage.

Luke's frank, sarcastic voice met him almost at once. "Geez, I thought it was some fucking aristocrat making all that racket."

The product of his little public performance earlier. Or perhaps Luke meant to put him in his place. The newcomer was always the low man on the totem pole.

"You certainly cleaned yourself up. Made yourself twice the man

you used to be."

"Yeah, yeah. You've turned yourself into a regular light show."

The scales had fallen from their eyes and they were finally seeing Kirie in his true, natural brilliance. Yet they didn't seem the slightest bit disturbed by this transformation. It almost seemed as if they were trying to pull one over on him. Kirie felt a prick of disappointment in his heart.

Still he responded. "Hey, just the same-old, same-old. But as long as you're asking so nicely—"

The same old Kirie, incapable of hiding his know-it-all attitude. He was dressed to the nines and his arrogance wasn't far behind. Or perhaps he was putting on airs deliberately. In any case, the sense of superiority Kirie was lording over them was hard to ignore.

"You've certainly outdone yourself, Kirie," Guy mumbled under his breath, a forced smile on his lips. "But don't fly too close to the sun."

A beat, and Riki spat out in a low voice, "He's still a punk kid."

"Hey, hey, consider things from his point of view. His triumphant return! Let him hitch up his britches and do a little strutting around."

Still, as soon as he'd shown his face for the first time in a long time, Riki was there, uncoiling his ill humor in his face.

Just following in your footsteps, buster. But that was the kind of verbal hand grenade only Guy would dare throw back at him.

"Heh, still getting your rocks off on that crap stout? I'll gift you some vintage Vartan next time."

"Really? Wow, sounds like you're really in the money. I didn't know selling out your mates to those android assholes paid so well."

Kirie burned inside. But instead of pitching a fit like he used to, he grinned instead. "Why not give it a try then? I'll make the introductions if you like."

"Sure. And when I get to the end of my rope I'll give you a holler. For the time being, I'll take the Vartan. A bottle or two. But why be so stingy? How about the whole fucking case, your lordship?"

"Fine, fine. Leave everything to me. More than enough to drink yourself into the gutter of your choosing. Just try and make sure you don't expire there."

The prickly back and forth banter was throwing off sparks that threatened to burst into an inferno, and this time Norris jumped in. "Naw, whatever you can spring for, that's fine. The Vartan don't mean shit compared to dealing with Jeeks and his runts. They blew Herma's crib to kingdom come. It's getting totally out of control."

This time, cracking wise, Kirie unwisely scoffed at their timidity. "Crying yourself to sleep at night? Man, what a shame. Bison's sure got their tails tucked firmly between their legs."

Silence fell like a heavy curtain. Kirie didn't know the meaning of that silence. The troubles they'd seen. The clashes and the discord all playing out there on the razor's edge. Which is why Kirie read their words all wrong.

"Well, if you like, I'll bust 'em one in the mouth," he said, with every ounce of his insufferable self-confidence. "Anybody with no stomach for the fight, just give me a nod and I'll take your place." Devoid of self-consciousness, he dug himself in deeper.

"Hey, that's awful good of you," Norris said dryly. "Yeah, enough of empty talk. Nothing's holding this kid back."

That was hardly the opinion of the consensus, but it may have been sufficient to speak to the tangle of complexities in their hearts. No sarcasm or making fun. It was enough to make Kirie feel all the more discomfited.

"What? You think I'm tooting my own horn here?" He forced an upward inflection into the heart of the question. "I could cut those Jeeks brats down to size without breaking a sweat." Completely caught up in the delusion and forgetting where he was, Kirie scrunched his beautiful brows in a show of defiance.

"Well—you certainly do have a mouth on you, but I'll believe it when I see it. It's not easy to take little kids with big heads telling tall tales seriously. Though we can't begrudge the fact that for a bunch of weaklings burning through our assets and clinging to past glories, everybody has been so *nice* to give us far more credit than we deserve."

Luke and Sid exchanged glances—not so much agreeing with what Norris had said as the *way* he said it—and chuckled, the laughter rumbling up from the back of their throats.

Kirie bit his lip. He got the feeling that he being knocked down another peg or two, his feathers deliberately ruffled. It pissed him off. For the first time he realized that what it meant to make a name for himself in the slums. If he backed down now he would come out the worse for the exchange, so he ground his back teeth together and spoke. "Fine. Soon enough you'll see what I'm made of. I'm a man to be taken seriously."

He'd dared stand his ground, and as he glowered back at them he felt himself rising to the occasion. *I'm making a name for myself and living up to it!* But first he had a more pressing concern: to tear down the wall standing in his way. It was only then that Kirie recalled why he had come all the way down here in the first place.

He collected himself, took a deep breath, and walked determinedly up to Guy. "So, you reconsider our conversation from the other day?"

Ignoring Riki, Kirie sat down and looked Guy right in the eye. He betrayed not a flicker of the antipathy and revulsion he'd been feeling until a minute ago and effortlessly switched gears. The transformation impressed even Guy. But *that* had nothing to do with *this*.

Guy spoke bluntly, showing not the slightest prevarication. "If you're saying what I think you're saying, the answer is still no."

Kirie clucked his tongue despite himself. Now they were only adding insult to injury. "That's why I asked if you'd had any second thoughts." Uncontrollable feelings of irritation barbed his tongue

and his voice grew sharper.

"You're a persistent little bugger, Kirie."

"But why?" Kirie pressed angrily. "Why throw away a golden opportunity? Don't you get it? They're the elites. They looked you over and gave you the thumbs up. Why turn it down? It's such a waste."

He spoke without bitterness or sarcasm, and not once did he attempt to appeal to Guy's self-respect. Rather, Kirie treated the rejection as a personal loss. If he'd been able to pull it off, just a ray of that glory falling on him would have sufficed.

Yet the openness of the expression on his face budged Guy not an inch. "You're trying too hard to make the sale and I'm not buying it," Guy said, his tone of voice unchanging.

"But I'm telling you, this is on the up-and-up!" Kirie sighed as if in enormous disbelief. "You're thinking about this way too much."

"Some Tanagura Blondy types want to make pets of us mongrels?" Guy hissed between his teeth. "What kind of a bloody joke is that?" Next to him Riki's head suddenly shot up. "Besides," Guy continued, "You're telling me you came all the way here to single *me* out? I find that the hardest to believe. I'm an ordinary bloke, no matter how rosy the spectacles you're wearing. You don't think somebody got me confused with a higher class of chap?"

"Why do you have to be so negative about all this? Just because we're mongrels from the slums doesn't mean we have to live like this. I'm telling you, no mistake! I heard it loud and clear: *the guy who runs with that black-haired man*. At the time, you were with Riki, so it's gotta be you, right?"

So it's gotta be me, Guy repeated to himself. His hair was charcoal gray. It was obvious that the Blondy was not drawn to any particularity of Guy's person. *With the black-haired man*. If that indeed was what he'd said, then it was Riki he'd been looking at all along.

But why? Why single out himself and not Riki? Kirie insisted this deal was on the "up and up." Perhaps he was right. When it came to Blondies from Tanagura, he had no idea what got their rocks off. Like Kirie said, big chances like this simply didn't present themselves on a daily basis. When a choice cut of meat got tossed out like this, common sense told him to pounce on it.

But he'd been with Riki ever since their time at Guardian and was able to look objectively and unabashedly at himself in the coolest of terms. Permit himself to be driven by the desires in front of his eyes and the consequences that followed would exact a steep price. He could see the truth of that maxim everywhere he looked. If he harbored even the slightest of doubts, the best course of action was *not* to plunge recklessly ahead. That instinct was crucial.

Kirie was dangling the glittering lure in front of his eyes. *Don't be the coward who didn't go for the brass ring.* But Guy had no intent of violating the basic rules of his life at this point.

"Let's think through this again. Okay? A sweet offer like this—there isn't a fool alive who wouldn't jump at it."

But Riki had heard enough of Kirie's spiel. "Hey!" he interrupted, leaning forward and grabbing his arm.

Kirie frowned at him and shook his arm free. "What?" he growled, clearly annoyed by the interruption.

"Is that Blondy the same bastard we saw at the Pet Auction?"

What if it is?"

In that instant, like a blow to the back of head, the image of Iason flashed through Riki's mind. That cold, meaningful smile he'd seen in Mistral Park. A strange, frosty sense of panic rippled up his spine. He fell silent.

Kirie glared back at him, all the resentment and bile pouring from his eyes. "The invitation wasn't for you," he said with sneering laughter.

But Riki paid no mind to Kirie's boorish attempts at ridicule. His

silent contempt was focused on one person and one person alone. On the image of that Adonis in all his terrible and sagacious beauty. On *Iason*.

That day, the safe house used by Jeeks and his gang was hit by a tear gas bomb. Amidst the screams and angry roars, enveloped by the acrid, stinging, choking clouds of white smoke, the youngsters stumbled out of the building in ones and twos.

The response from the gawkers and onlookers to their cries for help was cold and indifferent.

No, far from *indifferent*.

The impudence and ferociousness of these punks had come back to bite them, and while not so bold as to applaud the perpetrators of the "crime" in public, more than a few satisfied spectators could be heard congratulating them under their breath.

Serves 'em right.

Unlike Bison, revered with equal parts of fear and admiration, the Jeeks gang had run relentlessly through its stores of good will and became an object of general loathing of the slums.

"What a pitiful sight."

"Look at them, pissing their pants."

"This is all it takes to turn them into a bunch of babies."

Writhing on the ground, tears and mucous and snot pouring from their eyes and noses, they aroused not a shred of sympathy. Only greater disdain and abuse.

This humiliation quickly made Jeeks the butt of jokes, and the naked glee again aroused in people feelings of discontent. Nobody knew who started it, but it began to be whispered about as if true: that as far as Jeeks was concerned—Maddox notwithstanding—his natural enemy remained the ghost of Bison and its equally ghostly

reputation.

An eye for an eye.

This was the revenge of Bison. The rumors raced through the slums. The speculation spread like a mutating, contagious disease, growing and mutating as it reached into every nook and cranny, reaching pandemic proportions.

AI NO KUSABI

THE SPACE BETWEEN

Vol.2

Destiny

Spring 2008

Afterword

Hello there. I don't believe we've previously had the pleasure of meeting between the pages of a book from Crystal Publishers. I'm sorry about the long wait. Though I'm not sure what I'd be doing here if no one had been waiting in the first place... but that's just the nervous and timid Yoshihara talking.

And then there's this business of the first chapter of the hardcover version turning into an entire paperback volume. Probably a lot of you were surprised to discover this as well. Though perhaps not as surprised as those of you who weren't even aware that one "Rieko Yoshihara" had written a novel such as this.

Well, a lot has changed in a mere decade. It seems like ancient history to me now.

In the meantime, Sun Publishing Company has released a two volume, direct-to-video anime, along with a CD audio drama that covers the untold story of Riki and Jason's three missing years. Participating in such interesting developments on completely different creative fronts has been quite an exciting experience for me. That's why I'm so pleased that the novel is now being re-released in paperback format.

After all is said and done, the best thing about the paperback publication is again beholding the magnificent illustrations by Katsumi Michihara. Thank you very much, Katsumi. In one way or another, the radical passions of that period of my life are beginning to bubble up again.

To be sure, just because a certain series (the *Hiromi-kun books*) put out by a certain publisher (Kadokawa) happens to be a young adult romance with no explicit sex doesn't mean those feelings have grown stale. Far from it, though the physical body may grow older, wicked thoughts and earthly desires remain with us always.

Back when this story first appeared in *June Magazine*, happily-ever-after young adult romances were not its mainstay. The hot and

heavy contents of the magazine were apparent just from glancing at the illustrations. A foreboding aura waited from its pages. Honestly, I read it from cover to cover as if licking the cookie bowl clean.

Perhaps that's why, to this day, I still have those issues in my possession. I'd say that pretty much sums up my opinions on the subject.

I've made major revisions to the story since, but in terms of the contemporary BL genre I'd be very pleased if it imparts even a touch of that unique *June* flavor, because in so many ways that was my starting point.

Well, then. Now that the first volume is out, I'm sure plenty of you are wishing to hurry me along to the next! Still, I'm very grateful we've been able to spend some leisurely time here together.

Incidentally, along with the paperback, Kadokawa is releasing *Hiromi-kun no Sainan* ("The Misfortunes of Hiromi-kun") and the second installment of CD audio drama based on *Ai no Kusabi*. If the opportunity presents itself, be sure to check them out.

On that note, I bid you all goodbye and good luck until next time.

Rieko Yoshihara

August 2001